

A solid relationship

The rapports between a provider and IT vendor should start strong and remain that way. That means discussing expectations and asking the right questions

By John Andrews

Purchasing information technology is unlike any other transaction for long-term care providers. It's not a commodity that is procured, received and stored.

Information technology is almost an organic entity, serving as the organization's circulatory system, facilitating workflow and enabling operations to run efficiently.

Such an integral component requires an extra dimension of service from the vendor to ensure that the product's potential and performance are up to expectations long after installation is complete.

It is imperative that IT vendors provide ongoing support to clients as a knowledge resource and if necessary, an on-site physical presence.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon facility operators to conduct thorough due diligence when selecting a vendor that will serve their IT system needs from the point of purchase to actual completion, and beyond. Depending on the size, scope and breadth of the system, long-term care customers need to let vendors know their expectations upfront and negotiate service terms that are mutually acceptable to both parties.

Stacey Empson, partner with Toronto-based consulting firm Courtyard Group, likens the vendor-client relationship to dating.

"On the first date, everyone is on their best behavior," she offers. "Reality sets in once you get married."

Part of the client's due diligence is to ensure the vendor's accessibility and responsiveness continue long after the system is installed



Vendors should remain very visible and willing to provide support to staff members of all experience levels, experts say.

and deployed.

"Require them to keep a dedicated client services executive available for you, someone who has senior status in the company," she says. "That person should be someone the client can call anytime."

Empson also recommends that providers ask about upgrade fees and service agreements, especially

concerning any add-ons the system might need in the future. She also suggests getting a client list from the vendor and calling them about their experiences.

"Because the vendor may only give you clients who are satisfied, ask those clients if they could refer you to others," she suggests.

Vendor reps such as Niall Doherty, president of Westchester,

PA-based e4, acknowledge that the nature of their business imposes a higher standard of service.

"Service to a certain degree is driven by the fact that healthcare IT projects don't have a terrific track record in general," he says. "It's not as predictable as buying a piece of medical equipment. When you deploy a system like electronic medical records, there is a minefield of issues that need to be addressed, like budget, delays and pushback from staff."

Providers should expect their vendor to have a solid deployment plan that takes these variables into account—a set of proven methodologies that ensures successful outcomes, Doherty says.

"It should be a 'customer-centric' implementation, not 'vendor-centric,'" he suggests.

Patience and understanding also should be part of the vendor's approach, adds Jim Hoey, founder and CEO of Joppa, MD-based Prime Care Technologies.

"It takes a lot of hand holding," he explains. "When a customer comes on board, they're typically coming from an environment where they have struggled."

Great expectations

A competent vendor should come in and quickly assess the provider's situation, ascertaining what needs to be done in order to establish an efficient installation. Hoey says a Prime Care site visit typically takes two days for setup and training.

"We get in and out quickly because our customers have work to do," he notes.

There has been a definite spike

in demand from long-term care facilities for increased electronic capabilities, says Neil Donhauser, vice president and chief information officer for Williamsville, NY-based Prime Services.

Along with all the operational efficiencies automation can produce, it also can serve as an effective recruitment tool, he adds.

"As a younger and more computer-savvy workforce starts to make their way into long-term care, they expect things to be computerized," he notes. "They feel routine tasks should be automated so they can use their time to better serve the residents."

"Service is critical to our business."

Kim Allen, Keane Care

Live, 24/7 on-demand tech support is a must for vendors, Donhauser says. His company, for example, makes representatives available to customers with the click of a button. Within 30 seconds a team member is connected to the customer's machine to help them resolve his or her issue.

"Our customers tell us their time is extremely valuable and they are being forced to do more with less each day," Donhauser says. "They expect a knowledgeable and experienced staff member to help them immediately and reliably whenever they need assistance, regardless of the day or time."

One of the biggest IT challenges for long-term care facilities is integrating archaic, disparate systems that serve singular functions and cannot communicate with other systems. Making the integration process as painless as possible for customers is paramount for IT vendors, says Don Frazier, vice president of professional services at Ft. Lauderdale, FL-based AOD Software.

"Facilities are tired of having to support multiple software

systems and having to enter data into many different systems just to keep the facility working," he says. "Most of our new leads come from facilities that have tried other non-integrated or semi-integrated systems and have become frustrated because they still have to enter information twice or the 'interfaces' break. Many software solutions out there claim to be integrated, but what they really

mean is that they have interfaces to other systems.

"This is not the same thing and is something that most facilities have learned the hard way after a failed implementation. Interfaces are only fragile links between systems that can—and often do—break. Facilities are learning that the only efficient way to go forward in the future is to seek a truly integrated system that has

a core built and maintained by a single vendor," Frazier adds.

Support called vital

"Service is critical to our business. Our longevity is due to being able to also produce the software, but to being able to install, train and provide ongoing support to our clients' satisfaction," believes Kim Allen, director of product support for Redmond, WA-based software

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firm Keane Care.

The firm will offer “value-added services,” such as client conferences, a 24-hour online knowledge base and training guides, Allen says.

When interviewing prospective vendors, providers should also ask them about how much effort they spend on developing new technology, says Mark Brownlee, industry sector head

and associate vice president of hospital and patient services for Infosys in Fremont, CA.

“They should ask their vendors how committed they are to research and development,” he says. “We have 800 people who are devoted to R&D and they develop 20 patents a year for new techniques and devices.”

He also cautions providers about extra charges some vendors

assess during implementation if procedures don’t go as planned.

“It’s an imperfect industry with imperfect processes,” according to Brownlee. “If there is an estimate error or part of a project that results in extra hours, we accept that and won’t bill for that additional time. Some vendors will bill for every extra hour, so it’s important to find out their policy on that upfront.”

Customer empathy

The key to solving IT problems is for the vendor to understand the client’s issues, says Steve Pacicco, CEO of New York-based Sigma-Care. Providers should probe prospective vendors for their depth of knowledge—not just about their systems, but also about their level of long-term care expertise.

“It’s about understanding your customer’s business—what their challenges are,” Pacicco says. “It



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“Some vendors will bill for every extra hour.”

Mark Brownlee, Infosys

is not about selling systems but solving the customer’s problems. When that matches up and is delivered in an effective way, you get great results.”

Steve Salazar, marketing manager for Schaumburg, IL-based CareVoyant, adds that the vendor’s services “are as important as the underlying technology and software design itself.”

The company’s “scenario-based” methodology duplicates and tests the full spectrum of IT, business and care practices in use at a specific facility to ensure that users are familiar with the new system.

“Clients should expect that a vendor’s professional services staff can effectively evaluate their current workflow, develop a well-defined process to use the new solution, validate that process, train users and be available for support when they are working through the transition,” Salazar says.

“They should expect a scenario-based training methodology that will encourage adoption of clinical and administrative best practices. Best practices are clearly defined procedures—backed up by specific software features—that ensure the use of compliant business practices and care standards that optimize revenue and improve quality of care.” ■