

Maximising a remote Revenue Cycle Management (RCM) workforce through technology and transparency

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Abstract The onset of COVID-19 in 2020 forced revenue cycle management organisations to ride the work-from-home trend. As the pandemic's 'stay-at-home' mandates continued, these organisations began to experience the benefits of a remote workforce — improved work-life balance, employee satisfaction and productivity among others. When the restrictions of the pandemic lessened, the desire to maintain a flexible work environment remained strong. Organisations must now find ways to optimise their remote workforce without the comfort of walking the floors for real-time observation and feedback. They must now replace previous best practices of an in-person work environment with technology that provides real-time visibility into day-to-day activities, performance improvement opportunities, centralised workflow, advanced account segmentation strategies and modern payment options. By implementing technologies to amplify their workforce from within flexible workplace environments, organisations will reap the benefits of improved productivity performance. They will also create a work environment that boosts morale and reduces staff turnover by setting up their staff for success and investing in tools that remove barriers to achieving their goals and enhancing their experience.

KEYWORDS: revenue cycle management (RCM), remote workforce, technology, productivity, employee satisfaction, quality assurance

INTRODUCTION

The work-from-home (WFH) trend has been on the rise for quite some time — according to Global Workplace Analytics, remote work has grown by 91 per cent over the past 10 years. But for organisations that

were not yet fully on board with the trend, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forced them to figure out how to make that structure work. For revenue cycle management (RCM) leaders, their initial thought was that it would not be permanent —

it would only be a blip in the matrix, and the return to an in-office structure would happen soon enough. The pandemic, as we all know now, was anything but short-lived.

But as weeks became months and 'stay-at-home' mandates continued to extend, health systems and hospital providers actually began to experience the benefits of this shift to a remote set-up. Employees, by and large, welcomed this new WFH environment, with 81 per cent citing work-life balance as the chief reason they enjoy the flexibility of remote work. And with turnover rates in the call centre industry averaging between 30 and 45 per cent, employee satisfaction, as it relates to employee retention, simply cannot be discounted.

Now, with 75 per cent of organisations intending to restructure their revenue cycle operations in response to shifting business dynamics driven by the pandemic, RCM leaders must figure out how to not only manage but also optimise their remote employees, through transparent processes and tech solutions — all while ensuring patient satisfaction remains top priority.

THE OBSTACLES — WHAT IS PREVENTING PROVIDERS FROM MAXIMISING THEIR REMOTE WORKFORCE?

While RCM leaders have come to understand the need, as well as the benefits, associated with embracing a remote workforce, many have some crucial obstacles to overcome within their current processes and technology solutions before they can unlock the true value and reach the full potential of their remote staff.

No real-time visibility into account rep daily activities

A provider's electronic health record (EHR) system is the beating heart of their enterprise. It performs numerous vital functions

that help ensure operational efficiency, high-quality patient care and a streamlined, robust revenue cycle.

But despite the clear value an EHR platform provides, most EHRs lack the automation and insights needed to ensure that RCM leaders, or their staff, are set up for success. EHRs remain limited in their capacity to streamline and improve each account rep's impact on RCM operations, and their productivity tracking capabilities barely scratch the surface of understanding what is happening day-to-day with their staff on the front lines. Limited, inconsistent and frequently unreliable data deny RCM team leaders crucial insights regarding account activity, processes and employee performance. Actual talk times, which accounts are being worked and whether account representatives are following standard operating procedures are open-ended questions with no easy answers.

Meanwhile, account representatives head into each call without the benefit of timely, valuable references such as a definitive list of accounts to be worked, payers' specific requirements and scoring guidelines, to name a few. They are not empowered to make the best use of their time, and managers do not have a clear view of when and how accounts are being worked to completion.

This visibility is essential for overall staff management in general but is even more essential when managing staff remotely.

Inability to monitor, coach and improve account rep performance

When it comes to providing a high-quality, patient-centric experience, staff performance is of the utmost importance. In a live office environment, managers often spend time walking the aisles of the collection floor. They can listen to their account reps' conversations and hear first-hand how they are handling calls.

But without a 'live' collection floor to walk, coupled with their EHR platform's lack of performance visibility and real-time

data, many RCM team leaders are flying blind or relying on self-reporting. It is not clear which individual reps need additional coaching and whether there are larger performance trends that call for training updates.

To add to the problem, many provider organisations rely on manual quality assurance (QA) programmes, which are burdensome and time-consuming. Between manual spreadsheet entries, paper shuffling and combing through account records for a handful of calls to audit, QA is an ongoing resource drain, causing management to simply spin their wheels.

Lack of centralised workflow

Many providers managing RCM operations use multiple data sources and vendor solutions, creating an environment that can make it difficult to identify, communicate and resolve issues across the revenue cycle continuum.

Painful for both in-office and remote account representatives, when they have to navigate these various systems to gather the data points necessary to work their account inventory, they are likely impeded by a challenging, disjointed process. This means they have no choice but to rely on manual processes that increase the likelihood of human error as well as significantly slow the speed to account resolution.

It is a constant strain on resources and only adds to the discouragement of staff as they struggle to produce results day in, day out.

No strategic approach to working accounts

Some of the biggest revenue drains providers and health systems experience are tied directly to their ability to empower their RCM staff to work smarter, not harder.

In truth, most account representatives are simply not equipped with the automated

technology they need to maximise their time or their efforts. Without this technology, account reps are left to decide on their own which accounts to work, when and how — and without built-in controls or guidance to help ensure that standard operating procedures are consistently followed.

As a result, opportunities to recover revenue are lost, and accounts languish in accounts receivable (A/R). As providers expand their workforce without addressing common productivity drains, these lost opportunities multiply.

Meanwhile, ineffective agents lose heart and head for the door in large numbers. Providers scramble to backfill positions while scaling their A/R operations. Hiring and onboarding costs continue to rise.

Limited communications and payment options

Patients are consumers who expect convenient, flexible service from every business they engage — healthcare providers included. Unfortunately, the healthcare industry has been slow to adopt digital channels and tools that patients can use to access their accounts, get real-time views of balances owed, set up payment arrangements, and easily make a payment whether they are at home or on the go.

Without embedded patient engagement tools, account representatives are unable to communicate with patients through their preferred digital channels. Self-service tools not only increase likelihood of payment but also free staff from performing redundant tasks that can be resolved through automated communication methods and allow them to focus on accounts that require human intervention.

THE TECH PROVIDERS NEED TO OVERCOME THE OBSTACLES

Successful RCM organisations are finding ways to create a transparent workforce

environment through technology and processes that allow staff to function more efficiently, improve staff and patient satisfaction and ultimately help speed the path to payment and account resolution.

Real-time account representative visibility

For providers managing remote teams, the total number of accounts worked for the day might be the only performance metric available. Because this a lagging indicator of productivity, it will not reveal why reps fall short of their daily target or how many accounts could potentially be touched with their current staff.

To define and achieve an ideal state, providers need to have real-time visibility into the leading indicators that drive productivity, such as the following:

- How effectively reps are prioritising accounts
- How much time lapses in between working accounts
- How long reps are waiting on hold for payers
- Which/how many accounts reps are working on each payer call
- Average time it takes to work an account

This is where a provider's RCM operation transformation begins: knowing precisely how account reps are using their time, the quality of their interactions with patients (and payers), and any procedural errors or missed opportunities that need to be addressed. The process of measuring individual and collective performance has never been easier or more reliable with today's current RCM technology.

Voice and data monitoring

Managers can listen in on calls, listen to recorded calls and monitor

account-related activities to evaluate performance from every angle.

Dashboard displays

Through their individual dashboards, account reps and managers can see the same steady stream of performance data on a variety of metrics (accounts worked per payer call, time talking versus holding, calls made, etc). Managers have what they need to deliver valuable one-on-one coaching, and reps can independently self-correct.

Performance alerts

When account representatives are not maximising their time or progressing towards daily or monthly goals, managers receive timely notifications so they can intervene early.

Account rep rankings

Who are the top performers on the team? Knowing where they rank motivates reps to challenge themselves and improve their standing. Friendly competition among team members builds cohesion, increases engagement and naturally drives progress on the front line.

Workforce management programme

Without a collections floor to walk, the need for an effective workforce management programme becomes even more critical when it comes to monitoring, identifying and addressing staff productivity issues.

Regular, intentional coaching and training is essential for driving performance gains and keeping account representatives engaged. With a steady stream of data, a more efficient and relevant QA process and the benefit of timely alerts, managers can provide specific, actionable feedback that helps reps make meaningful improvements and reaffirms their value to the organisation.

Automated QA tasks

Call recordings are automatically matched with account records, and performance

data is fed directly into account reps' QA scorecards. Free from having to manually pull and evaluate random payer calls — which may not be representative of an account rep's overall performance — managers can use their time to coach and train as needed.

More relevant scorecards

Arbitrary or subjective definitions of 'quality' might not reflect what account reps should focus on to get the best possible results. A QA scorecard shaped by performance data is a more relevant and useful measure.

Better team management

As they watch performance data and QA scores change in real time, managers can identify widespread problems and provide refresher training. They can also share information with other internal teams to improve RCM overall.

Bigger performance gains

With more meaningful QA scoring and timelier intervention by managers, account reps can set goals, understand how they are progressing and continue to improve their scores, rankings and recovery rates.

Tools that boost account representative productivity

Ample performance data and timely, valuable feedback help keep account representatives sharp and motivated. But account reps also need help juggling high account volumes and making the most of every call. The right tools and resources can eliminate a lot of wasted time on the phone and ensure nothing gets missed.

Work queue scheduling

Account reps always know in advance which accounts they should prioritise. Reps can

be scheduled to move between queues based on time of day or duration so they can work accounts more evenly.

Insurance Hold Manager

Insurance Hold Manager (IHM) technology can drastically reduce interactive voice response (IVR) navigation and hold times — which can consume a third of the average account rep's workday. IHM alone can significantly increase productivity.

Agent playbook

Process guide helps new account representatives perform on a par with their more seasoned counterparts. Each time a patient or payer picks up, reps can refer to dynamic content on their dashboards related to Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), relevant training and state regulations governing payer responsibilities.

Look-ahead functionality

No more missed opportunities on the phone: from one call to the next, dashboard displays show account reps which high-priority claims they need to discuss.

Intelligent, centralised automation that drives productivity

Providers need a holistic view of the RCM continuum — one that provides the actionable data necessary to identify gaps in their revenue cycle. Without these insights, it is impossible to create an environment that fosters organisational transparency and ensures staff is operating as efficiently as possible. An automated, centralised workflow environment helps in several ways.

Centralised workflow platform

Using a centralised platform allows providers to create a seamless workflow environment through system agnostic bidirectional integration. This simplifies data navigation and eliminates slowdowns

with aggregation of patient, payer and account-level data under a single platform.

Robotic Process Automation

Robotic process automation (RPA) can interact with software applications and handle repetitive rule-based tasks (eg claim status inquiries) just as a human worker would. While RPA reduces the need for account reps to contact payers, it can also reduce unproductive time, such as the time reps normally spend on hold and navigating IVRs. RPA not only drives efficiency but also results in fewer errors and more uniform revenue cycle processes.

Process adherence

All account reps have procedures they must follow. If a denial is identified, an account rep needs to perform certain steps when talking to the payer. Uniformity on the front line improves performance, as agents follow established procedures that work. As performance improves across the board, so does productivity. Having a playbook that is visible to account reps while they work accounts will help them move through the follow-up process more efficiently.

Cutting edge segmentation strategies through artificial intelligence and machine learning

The investment providers make in their staff should deliver the highest possible return for their organisation. Productivity tools that incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) with RPA technology can uncover insightful patterns in patient data that can drive workflows to direct account representatives to connect with patients at the best time with the most productive methods.

Dynamic scoring model

Dynamic scoring uses AI/ML technologies to leverage historical data coupled with alternative data sources (spending behaviour, social media activity, online

presence, etc) while evaluating staff behaviours. This ongoing process provides a more holistic view of patient behaviour than that of a credit score-based static method. A dynamic score that updates weekly can breathe new life into patient portfolios and increase the value of accounts providers might not be working.

Propensity to pay

AI-driven, dynamic propensity to pay segmentation strategies prioritise accounts to drive the highest probability of payment.

Best time to call

Make the most of opportunities to contact patients by understanding the most likely time for successful outreach.

Omnichannel communications and self-service payment options

Patients know what service excellence is. In their daily interactions with companies, they have come to expect it. So it is reasonable for patients to want and expect their healthcare providers to offer the same level of service by meeting them on their preferred digital communication channels and allowing them convenient self-service payment options.

Providing patients a choice to pay through their preferred channel — whether it is text, phone, e-mail, portal or mail — increases the speed and probability of payment and allows account representatives to focus on higher-yield accounts.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to RCM operations, account representative productivity is vital. But productivity gains depend on a number of factors, from morale and retention on the front line to real-time performance management to automation tools that allow reps to accomplish more and excel in their jobs.

Technology puts financial success within reach

A workflow management suite that connects insurance follow-up and patient follow-up activities together, allows providers to design workflows and processes based on business strategies. It also ensures account reps are focused on the processes and accounts that have been prioritised for them, removing redundant, low-value tasks with RPA and API technologies and eliminating the cherry-picking habits that many RCM teams deal with today.

Fine tuning collection strategies with the ability to engage patients on their level by leveraging embedded omnichannel engagement tools that drive self-service and increase patient payments, further reducing redundancies and manual efforts, and allowing staff to focus on accounts that require human intervention rather than accounts that will resolve through automated communication methods.

Equipping supervisors with the tools they need to manage in-office as well as remote staff, giving them real-time monitoring capabilities to track activities throughout the day, follow up for QA, adjust activities in real time, and set realistic goals at the individual and organisational level. These tools further a provider organisation's hiring potential to look outside of their zip code for top talent, expanding working hours and collection opportunities.

Easily digestible views of performance and results for end users and supervisors across business lines, account statuses and types, individuals, responsibilities and more, provide visibility into the behaviours and trends needed to understand and make business decisions that will further organisational growth.

Remote work, when supported by these modern RCM technologies, is a trend worth embracing and puts real financial success within the reach of today's provider organisations and health systems.

THE EHR PLATFORM GAP

In the past decade, EHR systems have become a standard feature for hospitals, healthcare systems and ancillary providers. They not only increase operational efficiencies and improve patient care but also support and simplify the revenue cycle by verifying insurance coverage in real time, improving billing accuracy, streamlining claims filing and reducing insurance denials and lost charges.

EHR systems give providers the reporting capabilities and tools they need to make better administrative and clinical decisions, lower costs across the enterprise and capture more revenue. As integral as EHRs are in large, high-volume healthcare settings, however, they are limited in their capacity to streamline and improve each account rep's impact on RCM operations.

Unfortunately, many providers' existing EHR solutions lack the automation and insights needed to set RCM leaders, or their staff, up for success.

Account representatives are not empowered to make the best use of their time, and managers do not have a clear view of when and how accounts are being worked to completion. Given the growing adoption of the WFH trend among healthcare providers, the insight and performance gaps that hold these teams back continue to widen.

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