Health Information Compliance Alert

Fact Finder: Cloud Computing for HIT: Stormy Weather or Silver Lining?

Here are pros and cons to know before you hop on the cloud.

More and more IT companies with little to no experience in health care -- but plenty of market share on the Internet -- are heading into the HIT business, offering providers and other health care professionals off-site server space where they can maintain patient records. This is known as "cloud computing" -- in which providers use Web-based software provided by the IT company to access that server space, so that their records exist in the socalled "cloud" of the Internet.

Cloud computing, according to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, "is a model for enabling convenient, on-demand network access to a shared pool of configurable computing resources (e.g., networks, servers, storage, applications, and services) that can be rapidly provisioned and released with minimal management effort or service provider interaction."

If that sounds like a sketchy idea when applied to sensitive health data, well, it might still be. There are plenty of security concerns that have already been raised by cloud computing, many of which have not been worked out. Those include what kind of access and controls the IT companies, as vendors, would have to and create for health data, and whether the data is encrypted, according to a recent analysis in The New York Law Journal.

Companies like Cisco, Intel, Google, IBM, and Microsoft are hustling to get involved in HIT and compete for the business of providers who are angling for the $30 billion in stimulus money that is part of the federal aid package passed early in 2009.

Smaller, hungrier IT companies are getting in the act, too. Smaller companies like Practice Fusion Inc., which produces Web-based physician practice applications, announced in early August 2009, that it is partnering with salesforce.com, a cloud computing company. This means a growing market, and more aggressive sales pitches coming your way.

Before you go signing up for office space on the cloud, here are some pros and cons you should be aware of:

Pros include convenience, low cost, and low overhead.

If you hire a cloud computing company to manage your records online, you'll have access to them anywhere, not just at the office. You won't have to hire IT personnel, which will save you money. And you won't have to devote valuable office space to servers, people who maintain servers, or paper records.

In addition, some experts think that data safety is improved in the event of a disaster, since the records are safe from physical damage like fire or flood, and that compared to maintaining one's own records locally, hiring a cloud company to do it is safer because it can devote more resources to protecting the data.

Cons: Hey, You! Get Off of My Cloud! Drawbacks include security concerns, possible loss of control over records, and reliance on Internet connections. The security concerns, as already noted, are serious.

Also to consider: Will patients, or even providers, have to pay your cloud company to export records?