

Health Information Compliance Alert

You Be The Security Officer: Good Shredding Rips Thieves' Hopes To Pieces

Question: Our medical office is in the process of switching from paper records to electronic health records (EHR). What advice can you offer on appropriately shredding our paper records without compromising sensitive patient information?

Oregon Subscriber

Answer: Medical offices that do not properly dispose of every discarded document run a huge risk of exposing sensitive patient or office information to identity thieves. The risk of opening up sensitive data to potential thievery is especially high with medical offices switching from paper records to EHR.

Why? When a medical office switches to e-records, the staff in charge of the transition will eventually get rid of most of the office's paper files. This results in a huge amount of sensitive files that need to be destroyed before they are discarded.

In fact, shredding may be more important to your office's security than that new anti-virus software your office's tech person just installed.

"The idea that some hacker can snoop around your hard drive ... has Americans reaching for the nearest Internet-security software. However, it is far less likely that someone is going to break into your computer than it is that someone will sift through your garbage to get the same information," according to a recent Money magazine article.

"One of the best ways to foil trash-picking identity thieves is to shred all sensitive documents before throwing them out," according to Money.

But what type of shredder should your office buy? It all depends on your shredding needs.

Identify Items You'll Shred

When considering different shredders, the materials you'll be shredding matter, as does the amount of shredding you'll have to do. "Some machines can handle paper clips and staples. Others can destroy credit cards and CDs," Money reports.

If you'll need your shredder to destroy more than just paper files, make sure the shredder you purchase is powerful enough to get rid of CDs, office credit cards, etc.

Check Shredder Features

You should also see how many sheets you can put in the shredder at a time, and decide if the shredder has enough capacity for the office's needs.

Other features you may want to consider when shredder shopping:

- Cross-cutting (chops documents into confetti-size bits, as opposed to long strips).
- Automatic stop/start (makes one-handed shredding easier).

- Reverse mode (clears paper jams more easily).
- Low noise levels during operation.
- A paper bin with a window, so you can easily see how full the shredder bin is.

Prices: Money advises shredder shoppers to invest in a cross-cutting shredder, because "strip-cut shreds are much easier to put back together." When shopping for cross-cutting shredders, the market bottoms out at about \$40, according to Money. However, a medical office can spend upward of \$400 on a shredder if it chooses.