



Implementing an HL7 Interface

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Working Toward a more Integrated Patient Information System

Health care systems that started introducing Electronic Health Records (EMRs) may now be looking to move into the next phase of HL7 Integration, which involves working toward a single interface for exchanging electronic patient data. However, with the complexity involved in moving forward with this initiative, integration leaders may grow overwhelmed and confused on where to start and what type of system to implement.

Here are some suggestions for how you can move toward creating a new system to manage your growth while working toward the new standards.

Step 1: Start with a Strategy and Objectives:

Before you can begin any IT integration, you must start with the end in mind. How do you envision your health care interface looking? What type of efficiencies are you looking to achieve throughout the healthcare organization? How can you incorporate the needs of your patients, employees and providers into the plan? Some of the things to consider when implementing an interface engine include:

- Flexibility
- Ease of Use and Logical Workflow
- Data Migration from Legacy Systems
- Alignment with Current Systems
- Integration with Vendor Systems
- Technical Support
- Scalability to Manage Future Growth

With a strategy and goals in place before you begin the process of implementing your new system, you'll be able to develop a tailor-made system that will meet your current and future needs as well as your budget.

Step 2: Review Legacy Systems:

In order to implement an HL7 Interface engine, you must keep in mind existing systems in order to streamline your operation, reduce your cost of implementation, and ensure that all departments and processes work together. Along with the help of your IT partner, start by making an extensive list of the systems you have, how they communicate with one another, and how they pass patient information through your system. This will help you ensure adequate migration from legacy systems and integration with external information systems, and will also ease the process of developing your new interface engine.

Step 3: Map out the Workflow:

Along with review and analysis of legacy systems and information, we recommend adding more specifics to the analysis through documenting the workflow of your organization. This process involves documenting specific applications and how data passes internally -- between departments in the health system, as well as externally -- with outside providers and specialists. Your IT department or a third-party consultant should get involved here, analyzing how the components of the system work together, and how you currently code inbound and outbound messages. Such analysis will help when implementing the right integration engine, which will transform your data into meaningful content that can help providers better manage patient care.

Customize an Interface Engine

After creating the strategy, reviewing systems needed for integration, and identifying interface needs, your IT team can begin creating inter-operability through the customization of a new interface engine. This technical, systematic process involves finding the right system for storing, retrieving and archiving records, as well as analyzing them at the point of care. Once you determine the appropriate approach, you should be able to integrate data from your existing system into your new tool, without interrupting your current operation. Finally, your IT team will begin the final testing process before going live with your new interface engine.

It's Time to Get Started

Rather than become overwhelmed with the thought of implementing the next phase of your HL7 integration, spend some time analyzing your health system's needs, and following the above steps to build a customized solution that's a perfect fit for your organization. Whether you're a large hospital system with multiple locations or a small clinic, if you take the time to build a strategy and map out your workflow, you'll be moving forward with the right interface solution that can grow with you as the needs of healthcare change.