CASE STUDY – "FREE" Software

Introduction

Several vendors offer "Free Software" these days. This case study is based on real-life experiences and explores what is involved with the installation, training and deployment of "Free Software" and what risks are associated with the proposition of "Free Software".

The Promise

A significant number of dental practices are purchasing supplies on a continuous basis and introducing digital imaging hardware and software. Sales representatives from vendors providing these supplies and imaging sensors, quite often offer "FREE Software" to such dental practices. What could possibly be more enticing than "Free software"? What could possibly go wrong? After all it is "FREE". In addition, the promise is followed by additional comments such as:

- Our software is comprehensive
- It meets all your needs
- It is used by thousands of practices

To augment the promise a brief demonstration is provided to show how pretty the user interface is. The usability of such software is generally substandard as described by a JAMA article. (Please read: "A usability evaluation of four commercial dental computer-based patient record systems" by Thankam P. Thyvalikakath, Valerie Monaco, Hima Bindu Thambuganipalle and Titus Schleyer, Journal American Dental Association 2008;139;1632-1642)

The Reality

Once the purchase agreement is signed for supplies and/or sensors and the "Free Software" the staff starts preparing for training. As part of the "Free Software" the dental practice commits the following expenses:
- Conversion $1500
- Staff online web training $1500
- Staff paid time to train $10,000 - $25,000 (depending on the number of staff)

Once the staff is trained online, they go live with the new "FREE Software" and that is when reality sets in. The "Free Software" does not fulfill the needs of the staff resulting in:

1. Delays in servicing patients (due to difficulties finding pertinent patient information at the front desk)
2. Doctor frustration (need to open up to nine windows to locate patient information which is readily available in one page with Dentech)
3. Not sending statements to patients for a month or two (due to lack of trust in the data integrity)

After a month or two or three of this frustrating and embarrassing situation, dental practices return to Dentech. It is important to mention, that it is very hard and humiliating for an office manager to admit to their employer (the Doctor) that they were misled by the "Free Software" and that they need to go back to the software that really works.

It takes one to two months of work to correct all the data that was corrupted during the conversion and eventually the dental practice can find operational normalcy. The cost associated to correct the corrupted data ranges between $5000 and $15000 of staff time depending on how extensively the data was corrupted (e.g. having to correct all of the recall dates).

In summary, "Free Software" costs dental practices between $12,000 and $35,000 without accounting the staff anxiety and the risk of damaging the reputation of the dental practice with its existing patient base due to service delays and wrong statements.

FREE = $$$ +RISKS +STAFF Anxiety + Failure

What is wrong with "Free Software"? Deploying new technology requires diligent efforts in understanding what information is used by the staff, Doctors, patients and insurances and then evaluating whether the current or proposed solution meets the information needs of the dental practice. It is fundamental that the process of servicing patients, the process of running a dental practice, the people involved and the involved technologies are taken into consideration prior to just deploying "Free Software" without doing the necessary due diligence. Unfortunately, some dental practices embark on such risky change without carefully considering all the implications.

Conclusion

Before believing the promise of "Free Software" which can cost your practice $12,000 to $35,000, please take the time to understand and outline your practice's needs (people, process & technology) and then evaluate your current Softech solution side-by-side with any proposed "Free Software".

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"All that glitters is not gold."
William Shakespeare

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References of Dental Practices that have gone through this journey available upon request.