

Healthcare Cost Containment



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Investment Strategies

By Margaret Mayer

Five Ways to Save Money Using Scripting Technology

Automating common tasks through easy-to-use scripting software can help hospitals save both time and money.

Like tossing spare change into a piggy bank, the small things that can be done to reduce costs and time-to-revenue can add up to significant savings for many hospitals. One resource that frees up staff time and is not too hard on the bottom line is scripting technology.

Scripting technology includes a vast number of software products and applications that allow healthcare organizations to automate common tasks. Scripting tools largely eliminate the need to have a programmer spend time writing code to see the benefits of task automation. Sophisticated scripting tools can act like an electronic employee to perform tasks that require common logic, including interactions with websites. The tools allow hospitals to automate processes such as simple data entry or more complex workflow involved in registration, revenue cycle, materials management, or the electronic health record.

This technology is available with an array of functionalities. From freeware (free software) to sophisticated integration tools, pricing reflects product capability. Facilities can get started with scripting for less than \$10,000, but the requirements of the solution will determine pricing.

Here's how several hospitals streamlined processes by used scripting technology to automate five manual tasks.

Generate Reports

Daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, even annually—how often do the departments

in your facility generate regular reports to manage business operations, patient census, or financial status? At South County Hospital, a 100-bed, independent, not-for-profit, acute care hospital in Rhode Island, CIO Gary Croteau has transferred the work of generating more than 50 daily reports, 200 biweekly reports, and 94 monthly reports from the department managers to automation.

Done manually, report generation would easily take a dedicated FTE to generate all of these reports, says Croteau. Using the scripting technology, all standard reports are automatically created and posted to an intranet site as PDF files. "Our users are not IT people, and they don't necessarily need to learn the technical process of generating and accessing a report," Croteau says. "They simply need to quickly obtain the information they are looking for. We felt the best way to handle this was to generate these reports through automation and maximize the use of our intranet as a distribution mechanism for our users."

Managers have access to the current and archived reports in real-time at their convenience. No IT resource is required to run or manage daily report generation, allowing staff to focus on areas of greater need.

Reduce Downtime

Citizens Memorial Healthcare (CMH), Bolivar, Mo., decided to become a paperless system. The organization encompasses a 74-bed hospital, 16 physician offices, a home care agency, and five long-term care facilities. "Our strategic

plan called for seamless care across the entire continuum," says Denni McColm, CIO. Yet IT staff realized they needed a process in place should systems go down.

The IT staff used scripting technology to automatically generate patient care system reports to PDF files and send them to designated PCs in critical departments. In the event the systems crashed, staff would be able to view the reports and create paper charts on the fly, enabling physicians and others who provide patient care to easily access the patient data. CMH has a dedicated server with scripts that gather and deliver the important patient data to the hard drive once an hour, 24 hours a day, unattended. The reports then get "pushed" to a central location where all departments can pick them up in case of a system failure. The reports are also pushed to each of the long-term care facilities in more than five counties.

"We've had power outages due to tornadoes in our area," McColm says. "They didn't hit our facilities, but they hit a part of our town and zapped our (wide area network) connectivity for one of our sites for a day and a half. The only information that the site had on hand was the reports that the script generated for them that day. Being able to retrieve those documents was a lifesaver."

Process Purchase Orders

Ten hours each day. That's how much time computer systems specialist Michael Maggio is saving by automating the purchase order (PO) process at Woman's Hospital, Baton Rouge, La., a

225-bed, private, not-for-profit hospital. The script Maggio wrote searches the hospital IT system once or twice a day for purchase orders that have been entered by various departments, and then checks the departments' inventories for items that have fallen below minimum reorder points. The script automatically creates a new PO or adds those items to an existing one; it then ensures that the PO meets minimum order and other requirements, and sends the POs to vendors electronically or via fax. Buyers in each department receive e-mail notification of any POs that don't meet the minimums and can then add items to the order or hold it until that minimum is met.

In addition to saving resources, Woman's Hospital has eliminated unnecessary minimum order fees—penalties that had been costing more than \$300 a month.

“By automating materials management processes, we have freed up time for our buyers to put more attention on other areas, such as finding higher quality supplies and uncovering cost savings for our departments in the hospital,” Maggio says. “We have also avoided millions of dollars in capital expenses to purchase and implement a new materials management information system. Woman's Hospital is looking to automate as much as possible. We let the technology make the small decisions so we can have more time for the important decisions. This in turn benefits the whole organization and contributes to the broader vision of improved patient care, operational efficiency, and revenue enhancement.”

Saint Clare's Health System in Dover, N.J., has realized time savings by automating patient preregistrations and creating registration records through scripting.

Perform Data Conversions

Greenwich Hospital, a 174-bed community hospital serving lower Fairfield County, Conn., and Westchester County, N.Y., applied scripting technology to automatically convert registration information to centralized scheduling.

More than 10,000 appointments already in the health information system needed to be converted into the proper time slots in the hospital's scheduling module. The script automatically and accurately pulled appointments from a spreadsheet and uploaded them to the new scheduling application. IT staff at Greenwich knew from previous experience that this kind of conversion would normally take 700 staff-hours, or about \$10,000. If the conversion had been done on an overtime basis, it would have cost the hospital \$16,000. Greenwich staff developed the script in four hours and with testing completed the initial data load for the conversion in a week.

Improve Registration/Scheduling

Saint Clare's Health System, Dover, N.J., is a four-hospital system with more than 475 active beds, serving 23,000 inpatients and 250,000 outpatients annually. Saint Clare's has realized time savings by

automating patient preregistrations and creating registration records through scripting. Patient registration involves a great deal of information, which can be complicated by patients with temporary patient account numbers. Much of the captured patient data comes from the hospital's scheduling system, but because there is no easy link between the scheduling and patient access system, staff use scripting to comb through available data and automatically integrate it into new registration records.

“Scripting helps us save time for patients and the hospital at that first point of contact,” says John Burdek, clinical analyst for Saint Clare's. “Additionally, we can count on the fact that no errors are made in those records. With accurate and complete registration records, the billing department no longer needs to spend as much time on patient insurance verification.”

As a result, the hospital has reduced the number of registrations completed manually by about 80 percent.

The bottom line? Anytime someone is typing data into an application, there exists the potential to use scripting technology to automate that task. Automating these projects not only allows staff to be redirected to more productive work, but also ensures data accuracy, which can save a bundle down the road.

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