

## Searching for the Perfect Fit

By Hannah Baylor

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Remember the old days of on-call radiology rotations? The nights radiologists dreaded, pervaded with emergency calls forcing them to drive in several times a night to interpret studies. Grogginess was a serious understatement as they put in a full day's work only to return several times a night to once again wake up and replay the day.

As technology evolved, more sophisticated systems emerged. Radiologists soon only traveled to a corner of their bedroom where they'd endeavor to decipher crude images transmitted through telephone lines. Midnight calls continued, but at least the drive was eliminated.

Then nighthawks and outsourcing teleradiology appeared. What a novel idea: a team of radiologists designated for nighttime emergencies so your radiologists could finally sleep, and be fully devoted to and prepared for all cases. With client-based companies such as StatRad emerging in recent years, this outsourcing revolution has taken a personalized angle on teleradiology care.

Teleradiology companies provide immediate, often around-the-clock image interpretation for radiology groups, imaging centers and hospitals. In some cases, they have eliminated the need for on-call rotations while helping to ensure better after-hour patient care through a streamlined and thoroughly documented process of image interpretation and physician communication.

Most medical organizations use a telerad service, but is it the perfect fit? Besides offering highly trained radiologists -- experienced in emergency radiology and interpretation of digital modalities -- and a clear, documented system, what should a teleradiology company provide?

Quality of service is a big factor in any telerad decision; a company should customize its services to fit your needs. "Every facility we work with has different requests, requirements, protocols or procedures," explained Joe Mook, CEO of StatRad, a San Diego-based teleradiology company founded in 1995. "We customize everything we do to have the least impact on radiologists' current workflow and to ensure patients receive the same quality of care at night as they do during the day. We've implemented endless customizations into our systems. Usually if a client requests something, it's something that will benefit all our clients."

Some companies offer client portals which not only allow you to track the company's performance -- turnaround times, miss rates, etc. -- but also allow you to examine your own performance compared with other clients. Fast turnaround times are crucial in the quick and accurate treatment of patients, so while organizations vary, many deliver a typed preliminary report in less than 15 minutes. A constant flow of communication and critical findings reported directly from radiologist to physician also help maintain a high level of patient care.

"We form close partnerships with our clients and keep in constant communication," Mook stated. "We're not a faceless group of radiologists. Our staff is on the phone constantly with physicians or nurses, reviewing cases and answering questions."

A telerad company should also have an excellent uptime record and yet be prepared with a plan B. Redundant systems, connections and servers; data centers with Internet backbone connections; and high availability options are keys to a successful telerad operation. If these fail, a company should be prepared to work with its clients' own PACS systems so there's no delay in patient care.

As the health care industry endeavors to cut costs, competition for hospital contracts between local radiology groups and telerad organizations can escalate. Find a company devoted to working within the community, who won't compete with your local radiology groups. An on-site radiologist can still provide the best care as he or she is constantly and directly involved with the patients, staff and physicians at the hospital.

Don't settle. A teleradiology company should strive to go beyond the call of duty. Most organizations, for instance, offer specialty reads, but some will actually link clients together through their system so they can collaborate and utilize each other's areas of expertise. Others will conduct in-depth analyses to identify and help correct areas of delay unique to each client. Moock described a study his company recently did in which the ER staff found cases to take 90 minutes to turn around. Because StatRad tracked so much data through its system, the company was able to identify where the delays were occurring.

Companies may also help adjust imaging formats, assist with internal IT implementation, provide advice and feedback on current issues, and identify and create corrective plans of action when processes break down.

Most important, a telerad company needs to be available. "All our clients have the contact information for every employee in the company, but they also have my cell phone. I'm available to them at all times," said Moock.

### **Implementation**

Once the decision's made, implementation begins. Although no typical process exists due to the varying needs of medical staff, telerad companies usually follow a general procedure: An initial meeting identifies the person or group leading the process; individuals in the ER, radiology and IT departments exchange contact information; the groups review a typical implementation process and discusses a timeline including start dates.

From there, the telerad company should procure a detailed account of the radiology office's current workflow. Moock explained that the company can try to match what your radiologists are accustomed to during the day. They can then identify specific medical protocols and modify their systems to automatically transmit the information.

IT implementation is done through installed on-site servers or configured VPNs. Credentialing of physicians follows along with ancillary staff training; the latter is conducted either onsite or virtually. During the course of the first few nights, the company should be in constant communication with technologists and ER staff to ensure all is running smoothly and to your satisfaction.

### **Your role**

As a health information executive, your role in teleradiology implementation will differ depending on the size and function of your organization. In smaller organizations, telerad companies typically work closely with the facility's CIO, who'll often oversee the entire process, while larger organizations may appoint a person to delegate the implementation. The number of staff members involved also differs from facility to facility. Typically, it involves at least one person from radiology, PACS, IT, the medical staff office and ER.

Find a company that's not only willing to tailor its business to your needs, but that also has a track record of doing so. That will ensure your patients and organization receive the best the teleradiology industry has to offer.

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