

Minnesota Health IT firm's tool powers health information exchange



Health IT firm [Ability Network](#), which bills itself as the largest web-based health network used by more than half the hospitals in the country, has launched a novel online tool to build a community of customers and promote [health information exchange](#).

Branded as [myAbility](#), the online client portal will provide a forum for Ability's existing customers – hospitals, clinics, Medicare, insurance companies, billing agencies and others – to connect with each other. The portal is a combination of many different tools, including:

- An interactive bulletin board that presents industry news and information that users can share much the same way an interesting news story can be shared through Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and email.
- A dashboard that can help users in an organization share data on where value is being created with other users in the same organization.

- A video channel that will have original content about Ability's products, as well as provide video snippets of relevant industry information — say noteworthy speeches about health information exchange.
- An ability to create an email account powered by open technological standards that has been endorsed by the White House to meet the "[meaningful use](#)" criteria when engaging in health information exchange.

"With the meaningful use criteria and all the stimulus funds that are going into the health information technology space, health information exchange has become more and more important," said Steve Smerz, vice president of technical operations at Minneapolis-based Ability. "So what we are trying to do with myAbility is set up a community of users who can interact and share success stories, share what's working for them and what's not working for them and information that they need to be successful for their roles."

Previously, people interested in these tools would typically be a billing manager in a hospital. But the emphasis on health information exchange and health IT means that a different user profile may emerge, Smerz said. They could be a chief medical information officer, a physician and even the CEO of a health system.

Users can register on myAbility and begin to use the portal once they have established that they are affiliated with a current customer, Smerz said.

He noted that the online portal will leverage Ability's size and national reach to help customers be more efficient. For instance, customers in one state may be doing things a certain way, but if that information could be shared, then customers in another state could also begin to use some of the same strategies.

"Ability Network is uniquely positioned in that Ability has the view for the entire customer base," he said. "So what's working in Florida may be able to be leveraged by users in Minnesota."

The same goes for acquiring and disseminating information that Ability, because of its size, has access to. Recently, one of the top news items on its bulletin board was that Medicare was switching from AT&T to Verizon. Smerz said that the video channel — AbilityTV — may include video content from important conferences that all customers may not be able to attend.

"We can relay information to a national community who do not have to spend thousands of dollars to hit every conference the way we do as a vendor," he said.

How these tools are embraced by users remains to be determined. In describing the secure email account that uses the open standards for meaningful use, Smerz said physicians could use that account to send referrals to one another, or a specialist could send clinical evaluations to a patient's primary care physician.

Currently, administrative staff handle these matters and it is an open question whether physicians will like to get involved at this granular level no matter how easy it is. But Smerz is only too aware that while myAbility creates the tools, the user community will decide what is valuable.

"This will allow the community of users to discuss where that value actually exists and I guarantee that if you do an interview with me six months from now, the things right now I think is going to create value for this community, I am going to be right on one and wrong on nine of them," he said.