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Daily News - January 24, 2005 - Monday

Survey finds physicians split over tablet PC

Source: Healthcare IT News / Author: Jack Beaudoin, editor

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MENLO PARK, CA — A new survey of doctors shows that the tablet PC is making inroads among outpatient physicians, but not among their hospital-based colleagues. According to "Mobile Computing for Physicians," the third in a series of reports now out from Spyglass Consulting, some 77 percent of outpatient physicians say the tablet PC is a suitable mobile computing device for accessing multi-function clinical applications at the point of care.

Lead author Gregg Malkary says he was surprised by the overwhelming favor tablet PCs received in the survey "because there has been so much controversy around it." Previous studies had suggested that

tablet PC uptake was slow among physicians (see Healthcare IT News' special report, published in September, 2004), but Malkary said, "as you peel the layers of the onion back, there is a certain class of doctors who have really taken to it."

The study, conducted from September to December 2004, found that outpatient physicians were buying mobile devices with standalone clinical solutions to access data, assist them in making diagnoses and prescribe medications.

Malkary said that while outpatient physicians liked the tablet PC because they could run an electronic medical record on it in their office and carry it with them as they visited patients in other settings, hospital-based doctors continued to bestow their allegiance to "wired terminals" in patient rooms, offices and nursing stations. These doctors, Malkary theorized, didn't want the extra weight, didn't like having to tote a computer around with them, and frequently worried about security.

Despite an immediate preference for the tablet PC form factor, the study found that no single device is right for every institution. Among the factors that should be taken into consideration, the study said, are the healthcare environment, tasks to be performed, complexity of applications used and physician preference. Other devices currently finding favor with clinicians include PDAs and smart phones.

"It really depends on the environment," Malkary said. "Larger networks such as Partners Healthcare have invested heavily in wired solutions." Physicians in such environments are likely to be happiest with traditional desktop PCs.

Malkary said the tablet PC could find even more success if physicians coordinate their purchases with EMRs designed specifically for the form. "You can't just adapt software meant to run on a different platform and slap on tablet PC support," he said. "If you can find an EMR that's well thought out, well designed and easy to use, and meant to be run on a tablet PC specifically, you'll probably have a winner."

Malkary's study also confirmed what many software vendors have been preaching of late -- that hardware and software purchases won't transform practices overnight. "If you don't redesign your workflows at the same time [you purchase tablet PCs], it will be hard to succeed," he said.

Malkary says there is an important lesson for vendors here:

"There is no ideal mobile computing form-factor," he said. "That makes it very difficult for vendors because there's no general purpose, one-size-fits-all solution."

The full study is available on the Spyglass Web site.

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