Ardent Health CTO Sheds Light on the Value of Outsourcing Support

Larry Schunder discusses the selection process, scope, challenges, expectations, and benefits of choosing an outsourcing partner to manage Ardent Health's help desk.

Larry Schunder is responsible for all aspects of technology, networking, data management, and security at Ardent Health Services, a healthcare company with hospital and ambulatory facilities, 25,000 employees and more than 1,000 employed providers. During his time at Ardent, Mr. Schunder has successfully consolidated its data center from acquisitions, and deployed programs system-wide to ensure devices are encrypted and current on anti-virus protection. He is in the process of integrating three help desks into one and enhancing the health system's hot disaster recovery site. Larry has years of experience in managing and improving help desk services and has provided valuable insight on the partnership between CereCore and Ardent.

CereCore was selected to manage Ardent's Level 1 help desk, a collaborative effort that enabled Ardent to expand its capability to address key strategic initiatives. CereCore support services managed all Level 1 incidents, providing visibility to performance metrics, lowering call wait times and abandonment rates and identifying areas of improvement. Additionally, increased productivity levels from this partnership allowed Ardent to meet project demands while benefiting from a 24/7 support team that is entirely U.S.-based and healthcare-focused. Below is an interview discussing the selection process, transition, and ongoing management of Ardent's outsourced help desk and the value of partnering with CereCore in this initiative.

Please describe the process that led to your decision to partner with CereCore. What were you looking for in a partner and why did you select CereCore?

Ardent was looking for a partner who was healthcare-centric, versus an industry agnostic help desk which is prevalent in the market today. The people who work a typical help desk may not have an appreciation of the criticality of some of the calls, which can be very disruptive to hospitals if they're not prioritized and addressed correctly. So having a partner who is healthcare-centric and who manages their help desk with a hospital and patient focus was incredibly important to us. Secondly, we were looking for a vendor who was willing to be more of a partner with us. CereCore met both of our objectives: an organization who was looking to step up their game in the healthcare help desk market. We were willing to take the journey with them, if they were willing to take the journey with us. I think that's exactly what it's been, a two-way relationship of us learning how better to utilize the CereCore services and CereCore being open to input from us on ways to improve their services.

And of course, this partnership had to work financially. While the cost isn't the only driver of a deal, it was as important as selecting a partner who could provide the type and quality and level of service we were seeking.

What was the scope of the project and what was your time frame?

The initial scope of the project was to serve three of Ardent's markets - New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma - which were supported in-house at the time. We were looking for a partner to take over those services and potentially be willing to hire our employees as part of their team. We wanted to offer those employees an opportunity, if possible, and have been pleased that CereCore has retained several of them over time.

The timeframe was relatively short. Many of these deals take six or seven months to finalize in the help desk market and we did it in 60 days, from start to finish.

What specific challenges were you facing when it came to managing your Level 1 Help Desk? How did CereCore help?

Help desks are typically not a core competency of a hospital IT group. They lack the leverage and scale necessary to make it both cost effective and efficient. Also, a typical hospital IT department doesn't have the internal expertise to manage a help desk. Therefore, the hospital has to overinvest in management systems and extend the capabilities in HR to be able to operate a help desk. It's a different type of hire. It's a different type of training. It's a different type of day-to-day management. We believed that a centralized help desk function would offer a lot of value, which CereCore brought to the table.

Please describe a few situations in which you were particularly pleased with the work completed by CereCore.

The initial cut over went well. It was complex because we were not only cutting over the help desk and changing phone numbers, but we were also incorporating Ardent employees to work in the CereCore help desk along with their own associates. It had the potential to be a rocky period, but due to planning and CereCore's responsiveness through the first 15 days, the cut over went as well as I've experienced in my 40+ years of doing this, there were a couple of hiccups, but they were quickly addressed.

How would you describe the leadership and project management approach delivered by the CereCore team?

A lot of help desk outsourcing deals fall apart when the hospital doesn't understand the complexity and the amount of communications and coordination that it takes to move a help desk, either in-house to a third party provider, or from

one third-party provider to another. Ardent's group was uniquely positioned with some internal expertise in cutovers and dedicated the right number of people and expertise to the project. I was impressed that CereCore also committed the right number of people with the right backgrounds and the right attitudes to the project. Finally, I believe that the melding of Ardent and CereCore employees on the help desk helped bring a level of comfort on both sides that "tribal knowledge" was not lost in the outsourcing effort.

Please discuss the quality of CereCore's support staff and the level of customer service they brought to the project.

I think that CereCore's management coordination has been excellent. They have several individuals, not a single person, to help with the transition and ongoing management. In addition, their willingness to sit down and talk through issues, rather than point to policies and procedures, is key to not only smooth transition but also smooth ongoing operations and trust.

CereCore associates are given good technical training and immersed into a healthcare-focused culture. Again, the initial mixture of tribal knowledge from Ardent employees joining CereCore's team was helpful, but it's not a requirement. It's just a plus if it can occur. The rigor with which CereCore trains their employees before they work on the help desk is one of the major reasons why they're successful. Another key is their willingness to address staff who are not meeting standards or have come to the attention of Ardent through different means. You can't put your head in the sand as an outsourcing provider. Sometimes, an employee who is hitting "all the metrics" but isn't hitting the quality scores with clients' needs to be managed. If the provider isn't willing to address that gap, it can become a much bigger issue for the client.

So custom monitoring, constant two-way communications, having a partner who records 100% of their calls to determine the experience on both sides is key. It takes a lot of the ambiguity out of trying to resolve issues. On the other side, if your client is not willing to address issues with staff who have unrealistic expectations for the help desk, then the outsourcing service runs the risk of never being successful regardless of the service provider. A company considering outsourcing needs to have someone both at the mid-management and the executive level who's going to be responsible to resolve internal issues and set realistic expectations for the help desk.

Do you believe the quality of services provided by CereCore are a value to your organization? Is the quality worth the investment?

Ardent receives excellent service and we are expanding our footprint with CereCore by increasing the number of hospitals using them for Level 1 Support. If a hospital system is working with an outsourcing partner who understands healthcare metrics, I believe that you can create a mutually beneficial arrangement in terms of service, cost and metrics. For example, our service level agreements include first call resolution, average speed-to-answer, average time to abandonment, abandonment rates, and other service levels that we take very seriously.

Again, this success requires two-way communications and initial discussions between the hospital system and outsourcing provider about your expectations, which have been agreed upon by the system's leadership.

Please describe some measurable results and benefits of outsourcing your Level 1 Help Desk.

Ardent and CereCore hold monthly meetings to review the metrics and other information available from the help desk on both sides (weekly in the beginning of the relationship). Ardent's IT managers in the field call into those monthly meetings and have a meaningful dialogue about what's working well and what's not working well. Leveraging the tools and technology CereCore provides helps us turn data into actionable and quantifiable decisions.

This information has opened productive, two-way conversations in our monthly operational meetings about what's going well and what could be improved on both sides.

Finally, outsourcing a help desk must be cost effective and every organization's going to have a different definition of what's cost effective. Once you decide what is cost effective for your organization, then you should take full advantage of the strengths of your outsourcing partner. Take advantage of all of the knowledge, all of the data, all of the statistics that become available as a part of that outsourcing relationship.

How would you describe the physician and patient experience after the transition to outsourced support?

You have to focus on improving your scores and incrementally improving the user experience on a go-forward basis. You achieve your initial goals, then raise the bar - or in many cases lower the bar – resulting in a faster speed-to-answer, less abandoned calls, higher first call resolution. A great outcome is when the help desk experience becomes accepted as normal part of the caller's workday.

I encourage others to call the help desk to say, "I just wanted to call and say thank you for being there when I need you. I don't need you right now. I just called to say thanks because I know most of the time when I call I want something and I'm in a hurry and I want you to be Johnny-on-the-spot." I believe it's our responsibility to set the hospital/system's expectations for the help desk, with the knowledge that when people call the help desk, they are already in a negative situation. So it's about whether or not you can impact that negative situation proactively and positively that drives the success or the failure of your help desk.

What advice would you give to other hospitals that are looking to partner on a project of this magnitude?

An outsourcing decision cannot be a totally financial-driven decision. You have to determine and meet your non-financial objectives as well. For Ardent, service, healthcare knowledge and a healthcare-centric company were key factors in our decision. Secondly, you have to understand the amount of work that it's going to take, Ardent spends as much time working with CereCore on improving the helpdesk metrics as it would managing the helpdesk itself. You're moving into a world where you're hiring someone who has a core competency that you don't have, and likely never will have without dramatically over-investing as a hospital system. Third, setting realistic expectations between the two companies on what success is, and then continuing to advocate for what is a realistic help desk experience. But when it's outsourced, it's easier to pick on because you're not criticizing "your peer employees."

What are some lessons learned during this project?

One lesson we learned during this project is that we should have engaged our individual IT middle and upper management teams sooner to move more volume over to the CereCore help desk, relieving the internal teams of repetitive calls.

There has to be a commitment by the outsourcing partner and internal Ardent analyst to document and create enough information, such as a wiki or a reference item that someone on the help desk can pull up and help clients resolve questions beyond the traditional call capabilities and incorporate them into their training process. Ardent and CereCore have done a good job over the past six to nine months adding several new types of call capabilities to the help desk. First call resolution rate is something that help desk operators may not fully appreciate. For the client to leave the conversation feeling that their issue is resolved will result in a higher level of help desk satisfaction. I think CereCore's team has very good attitudes but in my opinion, the caller would be more satisfied having their issue resolved on the first call rather than talking to a nice person who has to have someone call them back.

ABOUT

CereCore, was formed in 2001 as a shared service business within a large hospital operator. We focus solely on helping healthcare organizations align business and IT strategies to improve processes and patient care. CereCore is a private company which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Hospital Corporation of America (HCA).

With a team of over 400 clinical, financial and technical professionals, CereCore has implemented EHR systems in more than 300 facilities. CereCore offers staffing and remote support services for all major EHR acute and ambulatory platforms as well as their ancillary applications.

We offer IT expertise from the provider perspective that is unparalleled in the marketplace. Leveraging implementation and optimization methodologies tested and refined in over 300 facilities, our platform delivers innovative clinical and back-office solutions, while reducing technology costs.

Our service teams include subject matter experts (SMEs), clinicians, advisory staff, and analysts. We focus on technology and results. CereCore teams bring hands-on expertise and demonstrated best practice. Since we are operators, our recommendations are based on current operating insights, not potential designs. We are constantly innovating and improving client technologies, and we share these lessons learned and best practices with all of our clients.
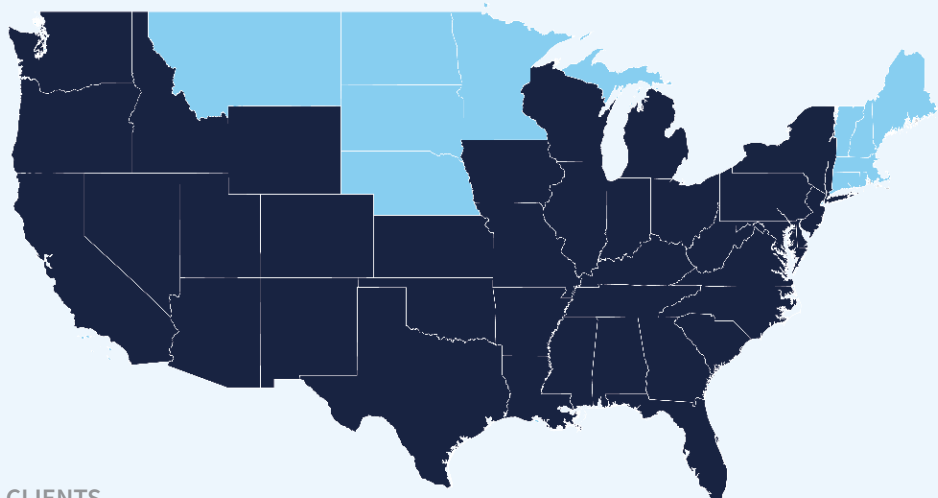
We proudly service 300 facilities across the U.S.

We Provide

- **EHR implementations**
- **IT help desk**
- **Application support**
- **IT managed services**
- **Hosting**
- **Technical staffing Strategic**
- **IT consulting services**

To hospitals, outpatient facilities, and large physician groups nationwide.

● CLIENTS

OUR SUPPORT SERVICES OVERVIEW

HDI®
Team Certified
Pinnacle of Excellence

With the CereCore Shared Services approach, hospitals are finally able to shift from the budget deficit paradigm of "Do more with less and reduce costs through workforce reduction".

Our innovative partnership solutions are often more efficient and effective when dealing with mounting projects and they dispel the myth that it is too costly to work with an outside partner.

Under the old paradigm, healthcare IT teams are faced with mounting challenges to respond quickly to critical requests for assistance and looming project deadlines while trying achieve high physician and staff satisfaction levels. Rarely, are organizations able to achieve all three goals. Response times to support incidents wain as commitments to projects increase; or project deadlines continually slip to maintain incident response times. In either case, physician and staff satisfaction levels suffer. Our approach supports your IT management, but doesn't disrupt your IT agenda. By providing deep subject matter expertise

through our broad scale, we help you convert non-productive time to productive hours. This expands your capability to address project demand and meet investment mandates. Additionally, our Application Support Services were designed from an operator's perspective. Our comprehensive application support offering covers your entire workflow. We deliver a TRUE shared services model which provides high quality results while driving down the cost of support.

Exclusive hospitals and health systems, we are a leading healthcare IT services provider that currently supports over 160,000 end-users and continues to expand our services nationwide. The Level 1 Support Services team recently accepted the HDI Team Certified Pinnacle of Excellence award. This award is reserved for teams that have achieved 100% HDI certification and celebrates their commitment to excellent customer service. The CereCore Level 1 team members have made the investment to maintain a common language and set of industry best practices through the HDI certification program in order to create a solid foundation and consistency in their support interactions.

Our approach enables organizations benefit from a broad basic knowledge set, consistent incident submission, incident tracking, increased productivity and visibility to key performance metrics that ensures efficiency and quality resolutions. Because we value the client experience, the support team provides 24x7x365 issue resolution without disrupting staff and giving them the freedom to focus on critical projects and deliver better patient care.

KEY BENEFITS

✛ **Repeatable, leveraged support processes with sophisticated knowledge base**

✛ **Deep cross-application expertise**

✛ **Support after hours**

✛ **Distributed skill set matrix**

✛ **Centralized quality control testing and pro-active release management**

✛ **Elimination of process duplication**

✛ **Client portal for logging incidents and providing real-time data to better optimize applications**