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Business

Geek on demand

Physicians need somebody to help take care of their technology. Here's how to get the right person for the right price to meet your specific requirements.

Story by Tyler Chin / Illustration by Edwin Fotheringham

I N 1997, INTERNIST STEVEN ATWOOD, MD, decided that a Web site would be a good idea for his Springfield, Mo., practice, but he needed someone to build it. He asked a colleague if he knew who could do it, and he recommended his cousin.

Dr. Atwood checked out the designer's corporate Web site and was impressed. "It looked like a big company's [site], and his rates were very, very inexpensive," compared with other estimates of $5,000 for the job. "So I went ahead and negotiated through the Internet to have him help me, and the charge was about $150," Dr. Atwood said.

Only after the job was nearly completed did Dr. Atwood learn that his Webmaster was an eighth grader, Dr. Atwood recalled with laughter. "I had no idea he was in junior high until we were well into it. He did a wonderful job."

Had Dr. Atwood known the Webmaster's age, he probably wouldn't have hired him. But the point, he said, is that the best way to ensure that doctors hire skilled personnel to support their technology needs is to ask colleagues, friends, patients and acquaintances for referrals.

Other methods include

paying monthly retainers once physicians find someone they like, hiring certified professionals, demanding that computer service and repair companies dispatch their best workers and hiring an in-house information technology person.

When it comes to the care and feeding of the technology infrastructure and equipment doctors have in their offices, there are essentially

two levels of support, physicians say. One covers support for physician practice management and electronic medical records software. The other covers everything else.

For physician practice management and electronic medical records software, the only — and best — option doctors have is to sign annual maintenance agreements with the vendors they bought their systems from, said Bruce Bagley, MD, a family physician in Albany, N.Y. That's because vendors know their software better than anyone else, making them the most qualified to troubleshoot any problems with it. Another reason is that the contracts include software upgrades at no additional cost.

Depending on whether they need to see patient information to do their jobs, computer service companies might have to sign a business associate agreement to comply with HIPAA privacy requirements. If they need to see patient information, then they must sign such agreements with physician offices, legal experts say. Otherwise, they don't.

That's a relief to some physicians.