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Don’t Think just Because you’re an SMB, HIPAA Doesn’t Apply to your Business

INTRODUCTION

We all know by now that HIPAA mandates how patient information is handled in the healthcare industry. This includes doctors, hospitals, or clinics, as well as healthcare “business associates”, anyone doing business with healthcare providers including labs, data storage services, consultants, or cloud providers. However, few people know that HIPAA also applies to most small and mid-sized businesses, even those that aren’t in the health care industry. They are mandated to observe HIPAA privacy guidelines on how they manage their employee’s health information.

HIPAA establishes a set of national standards that address the use and protection of protected health information (PHI). It aims to assure the protection of individuals’ medical information while allowing the flow of this information between businesses and healthcare providers, clearinghouses, pharmacy benefit managers, and insurance companies.

Most importantly for you, HIPAA mandates how you manage, store and share your employee’s healthcare information.

IMPACT ON SMALL AND MID-SIZED BUSINESSES

You have access to many aspects of your employee’s health information. As an employer, if you pay any portion of their employee health care plans, HIPAA’s privacy rules apply to you. Privacy rules require that sensitive health care information be protected at all times. This not only pertains to employee information, but also for any dependents enrolled in employer-sponsored in health care coverage. program. Most malicious software today consists of worms rather than viruses. Together firewalls and virus scanners are the first line of defense at the edge of the organization.

Here are a few ways these mandates affect your organization:

- Records containing information about employees' health are required to be secured not only from outside access, but also from unauthorized users inside the company. Only certain employees within the organization who deal directly with health-related policies should be able to access the information, and printed material must be password protected or locked in a secured location.

- You must document the policies your organization has adopted to ensure compliance with HIPAA. These documents need to spell out how employees who have access to health information secure the information, what circumstances health information is shared, and consequences for any employee that violates those policies. All employees should have a written copy of the policies.

- When transferring health records, employees must follow company policies to ensure the information isn't lost or intercepted by others. Employees who handle health-related information must also log the details of any sharing of the information.

- Under no condition may a manager disclose to other employees the details of a person's medical absence from the company. This means that when an employee is absent or has medical treatment, you may pass around a card for well-wishers to sign, but you can't disclose the reason for the employee's absence.

- Any employee in the organization who handles PHI — such as medical insurance policy information, a company wellness program or flexible health spending account, needs to receive proper training about HIPAA and how to handle health-related information.

There are many other, often subtle issues that HIPAA raises for SMBs.

HOW TO AUTOMATE HIPAA COMPLIANCE

It's imperative that you and your employees are aware of exactly what information is protected under the privacy rule, and have a systems and tools in place to protect it. Hiring experts to advise you on HIPAA can be expensive and a short term fix. Fortunately there are new tools available that can help deal with your HIPAA challenge and all of the issues above:

Data Backup and Recovery Appliances: Today's best-in-class data backup and recovery appliances address these mandates with automation of data protection processes.

Advanced backup appliances will automate the frequency of data backups, automatically encrypt data both as it moves across a network and in storage, test recoveries of lost data, and replicate files to remote locations to protect it from loss or unauthorized access.

HIPAA Compliant Clouds: HIPAA requires that all computing resources of covered organizations, including those provided by third parties, meet their compliance mandates. If businesses under HIPAA mandates want to use the cloud to store PHI data they are required to find a provider whose cloud infrastructure is HIPAA certified.

Compliance Guidance Applications: Best of all, a new class of applications has been developed specifically to help SMB organizations meet compliance mandates. Superior compliance solutions will automatically scan your network and perform an initial assessment to quickly determine if HIPAA requirements are being met, and if not, what needs to be done to become compliant. The solution will then recommend steps for remediation and produce all approved documentation so you can be prepared, in advance, for a potential HIPAA audit. Finally the solution will perform regular, automated network scans that will detect any new issues, identify potential threats, and inform administrators of the details.

You don't have to be in the medical industry to be impacted by HIPAA. To learn more about meeting HIPAA compliance mandates, read the report Win IT's Newest Challenge - Compliance. You can also speak to an expert to learn more about Unitrends Compliance Manager described above.

READY TO PROTECT YOUR CLOUD?
WATCH A UNITRENDS DEMO NOW.

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