

Win-win ... and win: The far-reaching benefits of outsourcing sleep study scoring

There was a time when outsourcing the scoring of sleep studies was seen only as a last-minute way to deal with staffing shortages. However, what began as a reactive business practice is now a proactive, flourishing business model. In fact, more and more hospitals and sleep labs are embracing the use of third-party sleep scoring services as a way to streamline operations on all levels, and the practice continues to gain tremendous momentum.

The sleep medicine industry has evolved dramatically over the past 10 years, experiencing significant changes in everything from regulations to requirements. Change is being felt not only within the industry, but also far beyond: increasingly, the benefits of engaging third-party scoring for sleep studies are being recognized and appreciated by a wide range of stakeholders, from labs to workers to patients alike.

Natalie Morin, President and CEO of Sleep Strategies, isn't surprised by this trend. One of the industry's top executives, Morin has built a company that has revolutionized a market sector and built a client list that includes some of the largest and most prestigious hospitals and sleep facilities in the world. "Moving sleep scoring out of the laboratory and into the hands of specialized third-party service companies isn't just about cutting costs for sleep labs," Morin explains. "We're seeing that it's a broader strategic decision with far-reaching benefits that we're only now beginning to appreciate."

Beyond the bottom line

By now, most hospital administrators and directors are aware that sleep record outsourcing can deliver immediate benefits, as sleep scoring firms have the ability to provide rapid turnaround (within 24-48 hours). This can quickly reduce backlog and help combat the fallout from a shortage of registered technologists. From a longer-term strategic perspective though the benefits of third-party sleep scoring services are even more significant. By freeing up staff to work on marketing, community outreach, and patient initiatives, labs can expand their practice, maximize operational flexibility, and generate new revenues. Outsourcing can also increase productivity, minimize the costs of training and salaries, alleviate the stress of staffing issues like employee leave time or attrition, and improve staff morale by reducing burn-out, thereby protecting and optimizing valuable human resources.

Perhaps most importantly, outsourcing improves quality. Third-party sleep scoring services like Sleep Strategies—which are exclusively devoted to the sole task of meticulously analyzing sleep studies – consistently generate results of the highest quality. The benefits of this are obvious. However, the uncomfortable reality is that quality assurance is often seen by administrators as a time-consuming, secondary concern to budget and staffing issues. Many hospitals and private sleep labs are bursting at the seams with sleep study backlogs; no doubt the temptation is there to cut costs and hurry the process along by hiring inexperienced or untrained individuals to help pick up the slack, rather than looking at other business alternatives like third-party scoring. However, this belief can be a critical error

when a sleep lab finds itself inadequately performing the task of scoring. Inaccurate results can seriously jeopardize not only the organization's reputation, but also patient health and outcomes.

"Many hospitals see it as quality versus efficiency and cost. But it's not necessarily an either/or debate," says Morin. She explains that many hospitals don't realize that both accuracy and accountability can improve by incorporating an outside firm that specializes in third-party scoring. Morin says that based on her firm's experience over 10 years, the level of quality available from a third party specialist like Sleep Strategies is nearly impossible to achieve in a hospital or lab where staff resources are stretched.

Patients first

Sleep medicine is still very much a human-centered industry. The reality is that our society continues to lose sleep; in fact, at last count, there were over 80 different sleep disorders documented. Whether it is because of stress, depression, or obesity, the demand for sleep studies continues to grow.

People who have problems sleeping are lining up for help at sleep labs across the country. This means that it's not unusual for a patient in certain regions of the country to have to wait weeks just to get in the door at a sleep lab. From a patient's perspective, any delays beyond that time frame just add insult to injury. From a medical perspective, added delays could end up seriously compromising patient health and well-being.

A sleep study typically involves completing an overnight patient study performed in-house followed by analyzing the data collected. Within the business of sleep medicine, the most time-consuming portion of the sleep study process is the scoring and analysis of patient data, an intensive activity that takes up precious time from staff and one that can result in unnecessary delays in diagnosis and patient treatment. According to Morin, however, patients shouldn't have to wait weeks for results of a sleep study. "Sleep Strategies has gone on record saying that anything longer than three business days for the scoring of a sleep study is a sign that things aren't working effectively," she says.

Sleep scoring is a meticulous and intensive craft that requires accuracy, reliability and consistency. In fact, Sleep Strategies was the first sleep scoring firm to establish a quality assurance department devoted to overseeing the sleep studies it is commissioned to analyze. For patients, as for sleep labs themselves, the importance of quality cannot be overemphasized. "You might never know that a sleep study has been incorrectly scored—until it's too late, until a patient realizes they've been misdiagnosed," Morin emphasizes. She says that quality scoring should never be rushed or timed against a stopwatch. "Rushing this process sends the message that cost-efficiency is more important than patient care," she explains. "This is definitely not the message anyone wants to send." Employing a reputable and industry recognized scoring service is not only an excellent way to ensure the efficient scoring of data, but also a way to gain access to experts, thus decreasing time and increasing efficiencies. And this, says Morin, means the needs of patients are being recognized, met and respected.

Benefits for the industry

Sleep Strategies educates hospital administrators and CEOs on the concept of sleep scoring services and the benefits that come with incorporating this business model. Just as important as a healthy organization, according to Morin, is a healthy sector. “I’m as interested in raising Sleep Strategies’ profile as I am in elevating the entire sleep scoring industry overall,” she says.

Early on, Sleep Strategies decided to staff only clinically experienced registered technologists. In contrast, competitors were downloading the bulk of their studies to under-trained or off-shore technologists. “The blatant use of unskilled, unregistered, untrained individuals performing the scoring of sleep studies is prevalent,” says Morin. “It is imperative that scoring not be viewed as a tedious task, but as the most important clinical element to correctly diagnosing a patient with a sleep disorder.” Using only registered technologists, Morin believes, not only ensures quality for sleep labs and their patients, but also adds credibility to the industry itself.

Again, the distinctly human side of the industry needs to be considered. More than ever, people are looking for a work-life balance. The sleep medicine industry, for the most part, is a night-shift occupation with only a handful of daytime opportunities available. While technicians often gain valuable experience and insight working nights for the first few years of their tenure, most are happy to make the transition to a 9-5 day job. The practice of outsourcing – working from home or an office environment – is an alternative to nightshift work and creates endless opportunities for technologists. The benefits of this type of arrangement are significant for the worker: outsourcing provides career mobility, prevents burnout, provides flexibility, and encourages professionals to remain in sleep medicine.

A promising area for the application of sleep scoring outsourcing is sleep research. Pharmaceutical companies and university research departments use firms such as Sleep Strategies because they can act as a centralized scoring headquarters, serving as a virtual extension of a sleep laboratory in their focused ability to complete all scoring tasks. Third-party firms can act as non-biased professionals and perform the scoring of the research studies following various protocols. Morin’s own research division has grown significantly over the years as the industry of sleep medicine continues to make advancements through technology and medicine.

Sustainability within the sector is crucial. With this in mind, Sleep Strategies offers a comprehensive sleep medicine training course – to assist sleep labs in hiring new staff or for continuing education for their current techs. These educational initiatives will come in handy, Morin says, as the industry braces for the next evolution.

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Key messages

- **Slowly but surely, and within an emerging economic reality, sleep labs are catching onto the benefits of outsourcing their studies and have been able to cut operating costs, free up internal resources, and increase productivity.**

- **As budgets tighten across the sleep industry, outsourcing will become the single most important business practice to embrace for any sleep lab seeking to reduce expenses, overhead, and excessive employee benefits.**
- **Third-party outsourcing allows for a faster diagnosis of the patient. This is the ultimate reward for the millions of people suffering from sleep disorders across North America.**
- **The health of patients and the reputation of the sleep studies industry depend on accuracy and integrity, with a focus on quality, continuing education, and flexibility.**

For more information on Sleep Strategies Inc., visit www.sleepstrategies.com or call 1-800-905-0348.