

IT Implementation Requires HIM Expertise

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by Kay Didear, RRA

Implementing a computer-based patient record (CPR) begins long before the first installment of software is loaded. This process significantly benefits from the skills and expertise health information management professionals bring to the table. But don't assume that your healthcare management colleagues have a good idea of what HIM services involve or the education and expertise required to provide and manage these services. It is incumbent for you to step forward and offer to support and assist with health information services (HIS) technology projects. I have yet to find such a project that did not directly or indirectly impact HIM, so it is best to be proactive rather than reactive.

A few years back I was serving as the HIM director of a mid-sized children's hospital in Texas. The institution was undergoing a major physical and infrastructure upgrade, which included a brand new HIS system. A technology leader from each of the affected departments was asked to serve an information technology (IT) task force comprised of representatives from clinical and business support services. The group evaluated our current processes, then worked with our supplier to ascertain what process improvements could be made with the new technology.

It was imperative that we work together as a team because for the first time, integrated technology meant that an action taking place in one area could be affected by transactions in another. My HIM background (with one foot planted in clinical knowledge and the other well versed in business operations) gave me the expertise to help bridge the gap between the two key operational sides of the house. I was able to help clinicians understand business operation needs while breaking clinical terms/processes down into laymen's terms for my business colleagues. Eventually I was asked to serve as the team's official chair.

HIM Expertise at Work

Our extensive prep work was time and effort well spent. We were able to clearly articulate our processes and needs to the supplier who, in turn, could direct us in our database creation and system design to achieve our goals. We worked independently on our respective portions of the system but would reconvene every two to three weeks to check our compliance with the project time line, compare database progress, answer questions, and iron out any issues. Again, communication and organization skills helped me to facilitate this leadership role.

During this phase I was data security consultant to the project. Systems security particulars were ironed out by the IT staff, but they relied heavily on my knowledge of state laws, Joint Commission guidelines, and hospital policy and procedure to craft an appropriate user security structure. In this phase we also crafted password and information security policies and procedures related to this new technology—again, an area of HIM expertise.

HIM skills came into play during training as well. Two staff members were appointed to serve as full time educators for more than 2000 employees—a next-to-impossible task in the time allotted. The members of our team stepped forward to assist. In HIM, I'd trained departmental staff and the medical staff on methods and processes for a number of years; this was another opportunity to use my skills. The material was organized, the tasks for each lesson clearly defined, and outcomes measurable. As training assistants, we worked one-on-one with staff members, helping them master computer skills as well as application-specific tasks.

Medical staff training was offered but poorly attended, so we geared up for one-on-one real-time training for our physicians at the time of conversion. Not surprisingly, the doctors often came to the HIM department and allowed us to work with them in the privacy of the physician workroom. It proved a successful strategy for all.

System testing was another imperative. A separate test environment was established and we ran a sample concurrent process—carrying out our patient care and business transactions in our existing fashion, then duplicating it on the system. Each

department monitored output and logs to ascertain that we were achieving our expected/required output. Variances were immediately identified and system adjustments or database modifications made to correct the error. This process was familiar because it followed the same model we'd been using in HIM for quality management and process improvement for some time. Attention to detail and emphasis on data quality made HIM key to the success of this testing phase.

The day of "go live" was a triumph for all of us. Nurses helped backload patients into the system while business staff assisted with patient care support tasks. The walls that traditionally separated us were broken down by technology, and we truly came together as a team with a common goal and shared success.

Lessons Learned

Today, this institution continues to achieve unprecedented success providing quality health services while remaining financially viable serving a largely indigent population. To continue to be a strong player in the marketplace, it is currently undergoing a new IT initiative to continue to build CPR technology into the organization. Already, the incumbent HIM director is a key player in the process. She understands the value of integration and brings an enterprise, as opposed to a departmental, view to this project.

In my current role, I often work with organizations that are looking to technology to meet their operational/informational needs. The organizations that are most successful have a systemwide IT plan. When they involve the end-user service areas in this planning process, they are much better equipped to choose a solution that meets the majority needs of the organization. HIM professionals have the expertise to help the team comprehend the far-reaching impacts and benefits of an integrated enterprise-wide approach to an IT plan that encompasses a CPR, EMPI, decision support, and management solutions.

The CPR is like no other technology you've ever encountered. But while you will need to take a different approach to product selection, the basic skills you possess are still very relevant: organization, communication, attention to detail, and emphasis on data quality and information management. In the future, you will be less concerned with space planning, paper flow, and chart tracking and more focused on data quality, security, and usage. Your focus will shift from document management to information management. I highly encourage you to step forward and become involved; it will be one of the most rewarding experiences you'll have in your career.

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Article Citation:

Didear, Kay. "IT Implementation Requires HIM Expertise." *Journal of AHIMA* 69, no. 9 (1998): 54-55.

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