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## Preparing Your Agency for New Technology – Making the Right System Decision

Implementing a new system for your homecare agency is much like planning to build a new house. Both take creating a vision, careful planning, setting realistic expectations and close collaboration with your builder. In this case the builder would obviously be the vendor. So why is it that so many agencies report great frustration and challenge when implementing new systems?

According to a recent survey conducted by the Healthcare Information Management and Systems Society (HIMSS) out of 310 healthcare CIOs and IT leaders, 10 percent expected their 2008 IT budgets to shrink, while another 12 percent expected their budgets to remain flat. This presents healthcare providers facing nursing shortages and impending Medicare and Medicaid cuts with a significant challenge to improve care delivery while at the same time decrease spending. Simply put, healthcare providers today must do more with less. This is especially true of homecare agencies where the nursing shortage is particularly difficult and recent changes in PPS have begun to create even greater cost control pressures.

The net result of this evermore challenging homecare environment is that agencies must utilize technology to its fullest potential to realize greater returns on investment. In order to achieve the desired success with new technology, agencies must have a clear vision and a well designed plan to help them through the daunting process of selecting and implementing the *right system(s)*.

There are many different categories of systems today that serve valuable purposes throughout homecare. They include; back-office, clinical documentation (EMR), point-of-care, scheduling, telephony, telehealth, benchmarking and other related systems. Rather than examining each category specifically, this article will address a higher-level approach to developing a universal process for building your agency's technology plan.

When it comes to engaging vendors in the system selection process, I suggest that your success is directly related to how prepared you are prior to meeting with vendors. There are several important elements that go into making a successful technology plan a reality for your agency.

- **Survey your users** – Ask questions within your agency before you ask questions of your vendor. Take time to collect good information for what it is that you seek to improve via your technology solution. Asking questions within your organization serves two purposes; first and perhaps more obvious, it is a good way to collect comprehensive data on what areas need improvement and what possibilities exist for increased efficiency. In addition, this will facilitate the important next step which is to document your system goals and expectations. Secondly, this exercise sends a positive message to your team that everyone's input matters and they are all in this together. So that by the time you are ready to meet with vendors your people feel a sense of ownership and are vested in the process. This level of *buy-in* is an important factor for success.

- **Document your desired outcome** – Create a vision for where you want to take your organization via your new technology investment. Prepare a document that highlights the goals and outcomes of what you expect after you've successfully implemented your new system. This will certainly go a long way when communicating with your vendors and will also help to formulate an expected return on investment (ROI). This document should contain a good portion of detail outlining some key system features and outputs such as reporting. Again, this level of detail will enable you to present expectations clearly with your vendors. Lastly, this document should be viewed as a working document that should and will evolve as you explore new technology with vendors. The goal is that you are bringing in innovative vendors with new solutions to the challenges you face and you should remain flexible and open-minded to these new possibilities throughout the selection process.

• **Return on Investment** – The CFOs need to become aware of the possible financial benefit of new technology long before the vendor turns on his projector. Developing an ROI model is no easy task. It does require someone with a deep understanding of your agencies operations and usually will require access to key financial data. That said, an ROI model can be one of the most effective tools when communicating with your vendor. The ROI discussion frames up the “what’s in for me” question and sets the tone for how your vendor should direct their presentation.

• **Vendor Scoring Model** – Expect to have good choices across all the various categories of homecare technology. With that in mind, agencies need to have a process of ranking the vendor systems. There are many methodologies for grading vendors. However the ultimate goal is to remove as much as possible the subjective nature out of the decision making process and move toward a more objective method. This can be accomplished by organizing the previously discussed materials to highlight the key elements that are most important to the agency. This involves a simple 1 through 10 scoring system with a 10 being a perfect fit (highest) and a 1 being no fit at all (lowest). In addition to scoring each item, agencies should rank these items based on level of importance or priority. For example, the vendor may score high on a certain item but compared to other items on your list it is a low priority. Therefore you should weigh that factor accordingly so that your final score properly reflects your business priorities.

• **Vendor Collaboration** – One thing that agencies and vendors have in common is that both parties want a successful system implementation. Use this common ground to your advantage. When arranging vendor meetings communicate in advance your specific needs and goals as defined in the sections above. Help the vendor understand your business operations so that they can best determine if in fact they have a high chance of success with your agency. Those vendors that are not accessible or interested in these types of discussions prior to their demonstrations are not likely the best choice for your agency. One effective way to collaborate with your vendors is to provide them with specific business scenarios that create the biggest challenges for you so that they can demonstrate how their system would perform in your context. Prepare your vendors so that when they present their solutions the focus is on how to solve your problem versus what their system does. If they can convince you that they have the right solutions to your particular business challenges then you should have a good understanding of the features and functions of the system.

One example of a successful software selection process is with Home Nursing Company (HNC), Inc. of Lebanon Virginia. HNC is a Medicare certified home health and hospice agency serving an 11 county area in rural western Virginia that recently implemented Delta Health Technologies. Jeannie Warner, Director of IT, remembers the initial apprehension of several staff members. She said, “We had many people in the office that had been with the agency for several years but did not have experience working on computers. They simply did not want to change.” Jeannie gives full credit to her Owner/Administrator, Bobbi Neal. “Bobbi recognized that some on our staff were intimidated by the idea of having to use the computer so extensively in their job. She was very careful to meet with many individuals to get their input and discuss their concerns. In particular, the Nurse Supervisor became the biggest cheerleader behind the system. This advance communication was one of the most important factors to our success,” said Warner.

In addition to the effort placed on internal communication, HNC spent much time developing their factors for the potential return on investment. Warner stated, “We wanted to have a good understanding of the economic benefit of improving our efficiency and cutting our cost. We identified that reducing our paper forms would dramatically decrease the nurse overtime and increase their time with our patients. This was an important factor when examining all the systems we looked at.” One area that HNC could have been better prepared for was the overall impact the new system would have on their hardware infrastructure. Warner said, “We knew we needed a new server, but we did not anticipate some of the related items such as back-up power supplies, office wiring issues and additional modem lines for the field staff.” Now that HNC is successfully using their new system, they are already making plans for their next technology investment. Warner claimed that they are now looking at expanding their use of telehealth and incorporating telephony into their agency.

There certainly is not an exact recipe on how to select the right system. However, those agencies that take the time and commit the resources to better understanding themselves, their strengths, their challenges, and their vision operationally and economically are in the best position to ensure their long-term success with their technology investments. It should also be noted that this should be a very dynamic process that grows and changes as you learn more about the available technology and how it can impact your agency through your exploratory vendor meetings.

Referring back to the earlier mentioned HIMSS survey of healthcare CIO and IT leaders, 75 percent declared that they expected to have increased budgets this year as a direct result of an overall growth in the number of systems and new technologies they are expected to manage. This statistic underscores the importance for agencies to prepare themselves to make these significant investments in new technology in order to increase the probability of success and achieve the greatest possible ROI.

So now that you have prepared your blueprints and your artist renditions of your new home you are ready to contact a few builders and find the right one that fits your specific needs.

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