Coming to Terms with Metadata: A Data Governance Initiative

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In the era before computers and search engines, libraries would use the card catalog—a paper database ordered by the Dewey Decimal System—to find a book or information. The Dewey Decimal System, a hierarchical scheme, is the means with which to identify, classify, and retrieve information at the library. In fact, it is the metadata for the library's assets. So how does the term "metadata" pertain to healthcare?

To determine that, we first need to define metadata. Simply put, metadata is "data about data." It is information that describes the particulars of an information asset. Metadata can enhance our ability to understand, use, and manage information.

Metadata commonly delineates:

- Means in which the data was created
- The purpose of the data
- Author, date, time stamp
- Location of the data
- When asset was accessed and by whom
- Standards used or followed to format data

Understanding metadata can feel like a daunting task, depending on what you read or hear. Since I like learning made easy, here are the fundamentals as I understand them for metadata:

- Foundation of an information management system (like every foundation, it provides a necessary support system)
- Enables data usage (i.e., collect and analyze)
- Integral to manage information effectively throughout its lifecycle
- Key to validate soundness, authentication, and reliability of data
- Assists with valuation of data and information

An essential component of an information governance (IG) program includes data governance (DG) initiatives. Data governance is necessary to govern and manage information from the ground up based on trustworthy, reliable, and clean data. Metadata management, as a part of DG, is an effective way to ensure information retains its integrity based on the characteristics of metadata mentioned above.

From a strategic perspective, it's also clear that metadata has the potential to impact the business intelligence of a healthcare organization, and its ability to leverage it for a variety of reasons; case in point, the electronic health record (EHR), which has the ability to capture any type of metadata category called document metadata.

> **Example:**
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> The EHR tags a document with the following: user name (who touched the document), what action was applied (view, create, edit, print), date/time, and length of time of the interaction. This type of metadata can be used to show the intent to comply with HIPAA, and the commitment to the privacy and security of protected health information (PHI).

Metadata can be a powerful tool used to improve an organization's insight around the information that it creates. When created with substance, metadata can support the use of data for sound decision making and optimization of business intelligence. To leverage metadata capabilities, stakeholders must establish mechanisms (standards) through their data

governance practices to ensure the integrity and stability of data and metadata. Without the application of data governance at this granular level of data creation, organizations lose their ability to ensure the trustworthiness of data and metadata, and thus the usability of information is diminished. Given that fact, organizations must devise an effective plan for metadata creation and management as a part of information governance initiatives to support their strategic goals.

Reference

AHIMA. “Rules for Handling and Maintaining Metadata in the EHR.” *Journal of AHIMA* 84, no. 5 (May 2013): 50-54.

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