

Down to the Basics: Policies and Procedures

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By Kristi Fahy, RHIA

Streamline, streamline, streamline! Organizations keep hearing that streamlining the way business is conducted will maximize outcomes and returns. Luckily, the path to a more streamlined organization takes us all the way down to the basics: policies and procedures.

It's no secret that policies and procedures are floating around every organization. In fact, most everyone has probably signed off on a few over the years. But do these individuals remember what they say or require? Do they know where they can find them? How do organizations ensure the workforce is actually educated on policies and procedures as well as adequately following and practicing what is within those policies and procedures?

Organizations must develop a strategic and collaborative approach to getting policies and procedures into the hands of the appropriate people and offer guidance to ensure individuals understand the importance of following the policies and procedures. Individuals must know the value of doing things the right way the first time and to have confidence in the work they are conducting—something that well-defined policies and procedures offer. All current and future organizational policies and procedures should be reviewed, updated, distributed, and enforced.

Policies and procedures are necessary to provide organizations and their workforce members with best practices and to ensure consistency across the organization. They also establish accountabilities and clarify individual responsibilities. Policies and procedures are foundational to the initiatives that they represent by defining what needs to be done, how it needs to be done, why it needs to be done a certain way, and by whom.

The development of policies and procedures should be an organization-wide effort that requires collaboration, standardization, and transparency amongst and across the various business units. This means that standardized policies and procedures should be developed and understood by the workforce in all business units to make sure everyone is on the same page and speaking the same language as it relates to business needs.

Solid policies and procedures will ensure:

- Visibility (ensures clarity from the workforce up to the executives, both up and down stream)
- Understanding (on-boarding, training, cross-training)
- Expectations (roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities within and across teams)
- Consistency (everyone follows the same standard process)
- Quality (defined steps to ensure desired results)
- Timeliness (defined steps to ensure desired durations and availability)
- Mastery (eliminates staff doubt and questions, builds confidence)
- Risk mitigation (reduces gaps, inefficiencies, compliance)

So what is the difference between a policy and procedure? According to consultants at the Pacific Crest Group, the differences are listed below.

Policies:

- Are general in nature
- Identify company rules
- Explain why they exist
- Tell when the rule applies
- Describe who it covers
- Shows how the rule is enforced

- Describes the consequences
- Are normally described using simple sentences and paragraphs

Procedures:

- Identify specific actions
- Explain when to take actions
- Describe alternatives
- Show emergency procedures
- Include warning and cautions
- Give examples
- Show how to complete forms
- Are normally written using an outline format¹

Organizations should integrate the above criteria into their policies and procedures to maximize the effectiveness and consistency of what they are trying to convey to the workforce. Topics such as disaster recovery or identity management need policies and procedures in place to ensure that each time a disaster occurs, a new patient is added to the master patient index, or an existing patient record is accessed or modified, the workforce is executing the task at hand according to the set process and following the rules established in the policy.

Ideally, policies and procedures will be role-based and training and education on the policies and procedures will also be role-based to ensure everyone understands their respective roles in the process. Relevant policies and procedures should be shared, and compliance should be expected from business partners to ensure the same consistency and that best practices are applied when information is shared to external third parties.

By implementing policies and procedures, organizations are more likely to succeed with initiatives given that the workforce is properly educated, and the policies and procedures are enforced.

Below is a list of policies and procedures that organizations should implement and ensure workforce awareness and adherence (this is not an all-inclusive list):

- **Enterprise Information Management**
 - Records and Information Classification
 - Information Asset Inventory
 - Appropriateness and Transparency of Information Use
 - Organization-wide Storage Management
 - Retention and Disposition
 - Data Design and Captures
 - Electronic Health Record (EHR) Governance
 - Identity Management
 - Information Sharing and Exchange
- **Data**
 - Data Quality and Monitoring
 - Data Classification
 - Data Stewards and Data Owners
 - Master Data Management
 - Metadata Management
- **IT**
 - IT Change Management
 - Business Continuity
 - Disaster Recovery

- Mobile Device Management
- Email Management
- **Privacy and Security**
 - Administrative Safeguards
 - Technical Safeguards
 - Physical Safeguards
 - Information Access Management
 - Information Sharing with Business Associates
 - Incident/Breach Management
 - Employee Sanctions Process
- **Regulatory and Legal**
 - eDiscovery Response
 - Legal Hold Response
 - Chain of Custody
 - Regulatory Audit Response
 - Mandatory Reporting²

These policies and procedures will lay the groundwork for the execution of organization-wide initiatives. Enterprise-wide adoption of these policies and procedures underscores an organization's commitment to effectively managing its information as a valued strategic asset. Eliminating any potential uncertainty will give the workforce clarity and allow staff to feel empowered when executing tasks. An empowered workforce will embed positive change into the fabric of an organization's culture.

As change and standardization becomes an integral part of an organization's culture, the downstream benefits will continue to transpire. Employees will experience increased productivity, reduced stress for duplicative efforts or workarounds, and positive outcomes of their efforts. In addition, organizational leaders and executives will notice several returns on investment.

On top of increased workforce productivity, staff will also see the benefits of using higher quality data and information that can be leveraged for decision-making—both clinically and for the business. The workforce will see a decreased landscape for risk or potential threats as business siloes are broken down or eliminated. The workforce will see a number of cost savings from initiatives such as retention and disposition management, systems integration, and EHR governance. Patients will have ongoing trust in the organization through the quality of the data and information that is used for better care outcomes, treatment options, and patient portal use. And organizations will see a positive impact on the bottom line. Organizations who standardize their processes across the board will not only experience cost savings and cost avoidance, but they will also see real hard dollar returns on investments by gaining a more holistic view of the information they possess and using it more strategically.

Streamlining processes enterprise-wide and with business partners will lead to better outcomes, operational excellence, and return on investment. The workforce will understand the strategy behind each initiative and will have set accountabilities to do their job right. Leaders and executives will have more clarity into business activities and will appreciate the countless benefits that surface from standardization. If an organization is looking for a place to begin reshaping and streamlining the way their organization operates, reviewing and updating policies and procedures are a great place to start.

Notes

1. The Pacific Crest Group. "Are Your Policies and Procedures a Barrier to Growing Your Company?" www.pcg-services.com/are-your-policies-and-procedures-a-barrier-to-growing-your-company/.
2. AHIMA. *Mastering the Information Governance Adoption Model*. Chicago, IL: AHIMA Press (2018).

Kristi Fahy (kristi.fahy@ahima.org) is manager of AHIMA World Congress Market and Communication Development.

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