

Governance Apples and Oranges: Differences Exist Between Information Governance, Data Governance, and IT Governance

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By Chris Dimick

Though sometimes used interchangeably, data governance and information governance are two distinct terms with very different meanings. And information technology (IT) governance is something completely different as well. With AHIMA pushing its members and the healthcare industry to embrace information governance as a major tent pole of HIM work, it is important for HIM professionals to understand the difference and interrelation of these governance terms and just what an individual can do to help foster governance initiatives that aim to improve health records and patient care. Lydia Washington, MS, RHIA, CPHIMS, a senior director of HIM practice excellence at AHIMA, has spearheaded efforts to help HIM professionals distinguish between the different types of governance. A recent presentation by Washington displayed how information governance, data governance, and IT governance are like apples and oranges—they are related, but have very different characteristics.

Information Governance Focuses on the Big Picture

Information governance takes on the big picture information issues, while data governance focuses on the individual data pieces. The root of many information problems is a lack of accountability for information to be timely and accurate. Information governance offers an accountability mechanism through a framework of policies, processes, standards, and stewardship procedures that allow an organization to manage all types of information in its various forms. Everything from e-mail, financial records, staffing data, legal records, structured and unstructured data, website content, and traditional patient health records can be included in information governance initiatives. Information governance initiatives ask organizations to think of all these records and data as an asset that can be managed and leveraged for improved financial and care outcomes.

Since information governance initiatives typically center on using information as an asset, they are usually led by senior level management like CIOs and CFOs. However, HIM professionals are equipped to take on these initiatives and serve as information governance leaders, Washington says. Information governance goals center on making sure that all information resources and investments support business goals effectively and efficiently and that the information assets enable the healthcare organization to accomplish its strategic goals.

An example of an information governance initiative is ensuring there are established life-cycle management processes for all the different types of records being used and housed in an organization. This entails determining how long to keep each type of record and why to keep it. Some information is more important than others, and information governance allows an organization to set formal rules for life-cycle management that prevents worthless records from electronically piling up in systems. These initiatives determine just what are critical business records and what records an organization must keep for compliance reasons. Legal risk comes with keeping information too long, or getting rid of it too quickly. For example, determining how long an organization keeps e-mail messages and what type of messages it keeps would be an information governance initiative. Another would be conducting an inventory of systems to definitively know where information is generated and how it is managed. Setting terms for how information is packaged and sent out through a health information exchange is another information governance initiative.

By tracking information governance, both individual departments and interdepartmental committees are held accountable to maintain and follow information policies. Information governance spans across business units and takes a facility or system-wide approach. "[Information governance determines] what are the rules around all of your information resources, regardless of what they are," Washington says.

Interworking Gears of Governance



Information Governance:

- Accountability framework and decision rights to ensure effective and efficient use of information across the enterprise to achieve its goals
- The responsibility of executive leadership
- Focus on strategic goals

IT Governance:

- Policies and processes to ensure the effective evaluation, selection, prioritization, and funding of competing IT investments; oversee their implementation and extract measurable business benefits
- Led by the CIO

Data Governance:

- Policies, processes, and practices that address the accuracy, validity, completeness, timeliness, and integrity of data (data quality)
- Operational focus (i.e., metadata, classifications, data standards, auditing, risk management, versioning, etc.)
- Business unit stewardship responsibility

Data Governance Gets into the Details

Data governance goes a step beyond information governance and looks at the actual data within a health record or website. This type of governance is handled at the department level, managed by the "owner" of the data, such as HIM, and establishes the standards and stewardship principles used to ensure the data are correct, trustworthy, and used in an appropriate way in a facility. Representatives from business units serve as data stewards who oversee and ensure the accuracy, validity, completeness, timeliness, and integrity of their business unit's data. Though down in the details, data governance efforts do also need different business units to collaborate and ensure a single source of truth for information. This single source of truth means that everyone in an organization or its information trading partners uses the same definition for a type of data. That allows the data to be comparable between systems, business units, and facilities.

A data governance initiative example would be auditing the master patient index to ensure duplicate records are properly merged. "Big Data" initiatives are also a form of data governance, taking massive amounts of data and distilling it into actual information that impacts care processes or other initiatives.

Information governance accomplishes data governance, and vice versa. Data governance focuses on managing the data coming out of systems, while information governance focuses on managing the system processes for creating that data. In short, information and data governance ensures that everyone is playing by the same rules when it comes to data and information in an organization, and that the data are accurate and trustworthy.

IT Governance Focuses on Systems

IT governance focuses on the actual IT systems themselves and how they interoperate or perform. IT governance is typically focused on making technology decisions and determining strategy for IT resources. IT governance has been a traditional function for many years in healthcare organizations and is focused on infrastructure resources—hardware, software, networks—and making sure maximum value is derived from selected technology systems.

This is typically handled by IT staff and CIOs and doesn't focus on the information flowing within IT systems. Information must play a part in IT governance, since an understanding should be established about the information and its purpose before designing and implementing an IT system or governing its use. But it is not the center of governance initiatives like information governance and data governance.

Get a Grasp on Governance

Understanding the initiatives that lead to information governance can be tricky since there isn't one surefire method for carrying out information governance in every facility. "It is not like coding or even like an EHR implementation when you have an 'A, B, C, D, E, do it this way,'" Washington says. "It is really how to think about governance and understand your organization, the dynamics, and its culture so that you can help move [governance initiatives] along."

Organizations that take on information and data governance initiatives usually assign a staff committee to oversee the efforts. HIM professionals should be on that committee since they understand the information and its sources, and how information and data is used, Washington says. Information governance initiatives should also be worked into current HIM projects, like "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program reporting and ICD-10-CM/PCS implementation, in order to maximize the work and get the ball rolling on all forms of governance at a busy time for healthcare.

"This doesn't happen overnight, it is an evolution, something you move into slowly," Washington says.

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