

# Keys to Effective Information Management in the New Millennium

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*Management in the 21st century will require all the planning, analysis, credibility, and results you can command. Here's an overview of some of the strategic challenges HIM managers will face in the future. Also see "A Vision of Health Information Management in 2010" (Journal of AHIMA Nov-Dec 1999), where AHIMA executive vice president/CEO Linda Kloss offers some views on where we'll be tomorrow.*

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Effective and efficient management of information in the new millennium presents enormous challenges. Connectivity, creativity, communication, and cost control will be the cornerstones of excellence and achievement.

These aren't just buzzwords—they're based in a reality that anticipates the broadened and intensified needs of both internal and external clients as a result of geographic diversity, government regulations, managed care, and sophisticated consumer awareness. If you are responsible for meeting and managing these challenges, you must not only think in terms of today but of tomorrow. What's more, you will have to offer a better product just to survive. Succeeding will require anticipatory planning, in-depth analysis, credibility, and results that exceed customer expectations.

How can HIM professionals strategically plan to succeed in the healthcare environment of the 21st century? In this article, we'll take a look at some of the ways information management is likely to change in the near future—and ways you can position yourself to respond and succeed.

## Who, What, Where, How: Information Sources

Information management has never before presented such challenges.

For a start, there's the question of scale. Small community hospitals and solo practitioners have evolved into large-scale health systems and elaborate physician networks. "Internal" clients are no longer housed within the same four walls. In today's healthcare environment, an internal client may be a health system-owned management service organization (MSO) located 30 miles away or a rural, multiphysician family practice clinic in another state. How can their unique information needs, both today and tomorrow, be met?

External clients—nonstaff physicians with admitting privileges, for example—present another significant challenge. Thanks to marketing efforts directed toward aligning providers with resources, health systems are attracting more external customers than ever before—customers that vary greatly in size and sophistication. Their systems may be state-of-the-art or may be a homegrown version from the early 1980s.

The effective information manager must identify all of the potential areas from which information will be generated and ask these questions:

- who are our customers today? Tomorrow?
- what are (and what will) their information needs be?
- where are (and will) our clients be located?
- how do (and will) each of our clients use information (applications)?

Remember, rapid changes in technology can render a given strategy obsolete in a matter of months. For this reason, it's important to know your customers. Think and plan in terms of the future. Eliminate opportunities to be blindsided by something

you didn't see coming.

## Control Over Information

Customer diversity also affects information control. In the past, information (i.e., data) was easier to manage because most customers conformed to management expectations and criteria. Today, your control over information from both internal and external customers may range from total to none at all. To avoid communication chaos, you must successfully balance individual customer needs and capabilities with uniform standards enforced across an entire network of users.

## Manage Your Resources

You also need a strategy for managing resources. Once you have identified your anticipated internal and external customer bases, you should be able to establish and maintain a multidisciplinary team that can craft a plan that will provide seamless "connectivity" across the healthcare continuum. Who will you need on your "team?" What skills will each member need to have?

Improved technology and market demand will make it harder and harder to find individuals with the needed skills and abilities to embrace technological challenges and work as an integral part of a diversified team. If you are fortunate enough to find these people, how do you keep them?

Your first step is to know the market. Expect to provide competitive wages and benefits. Seek out individuals who can be flexible, open-minded, creative, and credible. Be prepared to manage turnover. In contrast to the past, few people can be expected to stay with the same employer for life. Have a game plan that will allow business to continue, uninterrupted, when staffing levels change.

A "global" mindset will be essential to managing geographic and customer diversity. Avoid the "one size fits all" mentality and move toward a strategic work plan that recognizes and defines both individual and system-wide needs. Mass customization may be the key.

Mass customization encourages a deep understanding of groups of customers (for example, physician practices). Learn what requirements are inherent to the different customer groups you serve and design basic "deliverables" such as 48-hour transcription turnaround for physician notes, fundamental to their needs. The next step is to "customize" the deliverable to meet the unique needs of each individual client. Mass customization affords the best of both worlds. It encourages the development of sound, well-crafted group-specific approaches while freeing up resources to provide individual, customer-specific applications.<sup>1</sup>

## Information Management for the Future

Health information managers have many goals. Fundamentally, most of them boil down to meeting the needs of a diverse customer base in an organized, logical, and user-friendly manner.

Define a mission and vision. Know where you are and where you want to be.

Use a multidisciplinary team approach to provide the needed perspective and insight to develop policies and procedures that make sense for a wide spectrum of users. Include individuals with financial, operational, and clinical orientations, as well as marketing, communications, and technology staff. If you involve personnel with different levels of responsibility, from supervisors to staff, they will contribute positively to the development of a more global product.

Plan incrementally. Implement work plans in small, manageable stages. Build on what works and discard what doesn't. Celebrate successes and learn from mistakes.

Design tools to assess the effectiveness of information management "deliverables." Conduct surveys to determine if customer needs are being met and measure customer satisfaction. Don't forget to include both internal and external customers, from staff within the health information systems department to the elderly woman in the community who may not understand her doctor's bill. Customer satisfaction and quality service are critical to retention and growth of business.

Analyze actual outcomes versus expected outcomes. What worked? What didn't? Why or why not? Ask and answer these questions on a regular basis. Successful managers never "believe" something is working. They know it.

Establish credibility. Gain recognition for being true to your word and delivering what you promise. The intricacies of information management may elude the common customer, but a stellar reputation for responsiveness and reliability is something everyone understands—and appreciates.

Demonstrate the actual and potential fiscal benefits of information management. Use data, performance, and outcome measurements to enlighten and enlist support for expansion, enhanced connectivity, staffing, and research. Be cost effective but not cost constrained.

Create asset value by developing templates for common services, which can be customized for individual cases. Scrutinize your customer base and identify areas where opportunities for improved processes or partnering may be. Develop a sellable and "finance-able" business plan and market it to existing and potential customers.

## Tips to Remember

Planning, implementing, evaluating, and revising are quintessential requirements for moving information management into the millennium. Here are some final tips for designing your strategic plan for the future:

- Learn from the experiences of yesterday. Remember what worked, what didn't, and why
- Evaluate where you are today. Be realistic. Identify your strengths and weaknesses. Recognize and understand core competencies. Determine if you are where you want to be
- Explore the possibilities of tomorrow. Envision the future. Ask questions. Dare to be innovative

The managers of today who can successfully transition information management into the new millennium will be the managers of tomorrow. The millennium is just days away. Are you ready?

## Note

1. Berwick, D. "The Total Customer Relationship in Health Care: Broadening the Bandwidth." *Journal on Quality Improvement* 23, no. 5 (1997): 246.

## Manage What? Manage This!

As an information manager, your actions influence an increasingly diverse environment. While not exhaustive, this list provides some food for thought on the scope of the information management role in the future.

### Geographic Diversity

On site  
Local  
Regional  
National

### Customers

Health systems  
Hospitals and hospital departments  
Physician practices  
Ambulatory surgery centers  
Radiology services  
Laboratory services  
Transcription services

### Resources

Staff  
Work space  
Technical/training support

### Equipment

Hardware—shared or owned  
Support—shared or owned  
Connectivity  
Upgrades/replacements/new

### Confidentiality

Patient medical records  
Clinical databases

Vendors and local/regional businesses  
Employer groups  
Health plans/HMOs/PPOs  
Pharmacies  
Home health agencies  
Nursing homes  
Third-party payers (including governmental)  
Community at large

Financial documents

### Data retention

Hospital medical records  
Laboratory results  
Physician patient chart records  
Encounter forms  
Financial documents

### Applications

Data warehouse  
Telemedicine  
Cybermedicine  
Internet access/Web sites  
Patient education  
Clinical database  
Test results  
Clinical orders  
Prescriptions/refills  
Eligibility/benefits/referrals  
Patient records  
Record retention  
Social service/community resources  
Physician referral service

### Quality

Data standards  
Work performance  
Outcomes measurement  
Customer satisfaction

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