

Speaking the IT Lingo: Practical Considerations for Collaborating with Your CIO

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by Rachel Chebeleu, MBA, RHIA, and Jeff Partee

When it comes to evaluating and purchasing e-HIM® technology, effective communication between the HIM and IT departments is essential. For HIM professionals with a seat at the planning table, there are two key components of a successful working relationship with your CIO: understanding priorities and terms in the IT department and being able to educate the CIO about priorities and terms in the HIM department. With these components in place, you can both speak comfortably from common ground.

Getting to Know You

You may already have a good working relationship with your CIO, but think about how you might deepen this relationship to have a more in-depth understanding of each other's needs and priorities. Consider the role of the average hospital CIO. Typically, CIOs are responsible for supporting the hospital's vision by setting the strategic direction for its technology and overseeing its overall IT infrastructure and staff. CIOs must maintain a high-level view of how the infrastructure moves, breathes, and thrives, as well as understand the individual competencies of their team of software developers, systems analysts, and network administrators in maintaining and growing the infrastructure to meet the hospital's needs.

The role requires a deep knowledge of healthcare informatics and extensive experience with commercial information systems and applications. CIOs must be able to work collaboratively with a team of stakeholders who oversee the activities of their domains, such as HIM, finance, human resources, communications, and physicians.

CIO top priorities include leveraging technology to streamline processes and optimize clinical care. Day-to-day initiatives focus on cost efficiency and quality. Although some priorities and goals, such as building an electronic health record, may be common from organization to organization, the specifics of how each organization gets there vary considerably.

As you work closely with your CIO, gain a deeper understanding of what is important in the IT arena and share insights from the HIM domain. You both may be surprised at how much overlap exists between the two departments.

Articulating HIM Priorities

Thoroughness and honesty are essential when communicating with IT about what the HIM department really needs from technology. The first steps in working well with IT are developing a clearly defined list of department priorities and building the ability to communicate existing department workflows.

For example, if an HIM priority is the ability to perform multiple functions with the medical record simultaneously, IT will need to know who will access the records (e.g., coders, other HIM staff, clinical staff, researchers), where they will access the records (inside the facility only, from remote locations), and the purpose of the access (e.g., coding, patient care, peer review). Outlining workflow processes and record accessibility requirements will help your CIO match HIM business needs to a technology solution that has the desired functionality and security.

Demonstrating that you have thoroughly thought through your priorities and processes will help establish credibility with the CIO and reinforce your role as a valuable partner in finding solutions.

Speaking the Lingo

In addition to building understanding of the CIO's world, HIM professionals will have an easier time communicating if they have a basic working knowledge of IT terminology. The inner workings of the average hospital are exceptionally diverse and complicated, and IT staff can find it difficult to understand each set of departmental operations in a way that easily translates needs into IT solutions. Meeting IT halfway by making an effort to understand fundamental, important IT terminology will support smooth, efficient communication.

Learning IT basics can be made easier with an IT terminology dictionary, which you can find in print or online. General dictionaries such as www.techterms.org as well as more specific resources covering healthcare and defining terms and acronyms such as "HL7" are often helpful. A quick Internet search yields several options. This article touches on a few, but further diligence on your part to learn some of the terminology will go a long way in improving relationships with your CIO and IT staff.

Just as much of the IT technology and terminology may be unfamiliar to HIM, the terminology, policies, and requirements of the HIM department are often foreign to IT. Educate your CIO and the IT staff on HIM lingo, particularly where lack of knowledge might lead to confusion. For example, in the HIM world, ROI often refers to "release of information," not "return on investment."

Keep in mind that not every CIO has a working knowledge of medical record requirements. Very few CIOs understand that there is such a thing as the legal medical record, and so they also will not understand the legal medical record requirements related to completeness, retention, designated record sets, discoverability, and privacy.

CIOs will appreciate the time you spend setting the context in which HIM functions are performed. Explain terms and the requirements to support release of information, completion and suspension, physician signature requirements, and the data elements required for clinical coding. Doing so will improve collaboration efforts for meeting HIM department technology needs.

Understanding the Big Picture

When working with IT, it's helpful to understand some of the ground rules that dictate their processes-particularly their budget process and guidelines, as these often weigh heavily in technology decisions.

Discuss with your CIO and CFO the rules governing capital purchases versus capital leases and operating expenses. What HIM considers an operating expense may actually be a capital lease and may require CIO and CFO approval. Understanding the distinction is important because different technology solutions may come out of different budgets and require different levels of sign-off within the organization. For example, installed solutions that require the purchase of hardware and software are typically considered capital expenses, while hosted solutions are considered operating expenses. A solid grasp of IT budget guidelines will allow you to approach your HIM technology strategy from the same perspective.

To effectively drive technology initiatives, develop a clear sense of how HIM goals dovetail with other departmental goals to benefit the organization overall. This big-picture approach will bring awareness of the challenges you might face in achieving HIM goals. For example, achieving a paperless HIM environment is a goal that benefits the entire enterprise, but many factors influence whether this goal is feasible for your organization. Digitally entering all data on traditional nursing forms, interfacing additional clinical reporting systems, and providing a user-friendly lookup interface are all significant projects, and the scope of work and associated costs can be easily underestimated.

Ultimately, effective communication and collaboration with your CIO might reveal that you need to approach your goals in different ways-for example, step-by-step rather than a full-blown technology implementation.

Weighing Options

One of the most important concepts to grasp in understanding IT terms is the difference between the application service provider (ASP) approach and the installed software approach and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Your CIO and IT staff may have a preference for one approach over the other based on overall strategy, objectives, and budget considerations.

ASP technology is hosted or controlled by the software vendor and accessed by users over the Internet. Data storage can be managed on an as-needed basis, which eliminates the risk of purchasing too much or the wrong type of storage. Costly server purchases and client licensing fees are avoided, as are system maintenance and IT support requirements. These advantages, in addition to short implementation timeframes, make ASP solutions very attractive.

Installed solutions sometimes offer more comprehensive integrated functionality with many hospital systems. However, they require the purchase and maintenance of both hardware and software. Installed solutions typically take a long time to implement and can be quite costly, involving substantial up-front capital expenditures.

Ultimately, what matters to both IT and HIM is having information available when and where it is needed. Often this requires ensuring that many systems work together—interoperability, in IT lingo. Interoperability can be achieved in both installed and ASP solutions with varying degrees of effort and cost. HIM technology options that offer physician portals and single sign-on can achieve many of the advantages of an electronic record without a high price tag or lengthy implementation.

Summing Up

You and your CIO are allies in the challenge to automate information processing in your facility. The quality and completeness of the technical solutions to improve the productivity and profitability of your business operations will be determined in large part by respecting each other's knowledge and working together. If you are not already a part of this process at your facility, begin now.

Rachel Chebeleu (rachel.chebeleu@uphs.upenn.edu) is director of health information management and professional fee abstraction at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, PA. **Jeff Partee** (jwpartee@wilsonhospital.com) is CIO at Wilson Memorial Hospital in Sidney, OH.

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