

Strategic Alignment: The Driving Force for Information Governance

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If we step back to consider why a healthcare organization would find it beneficial to adopt information governance (IG), there is no more compelling reason than that it is one of the best ways to successfully drive organizational strategy. It is impossible to successfully execute the organization's strategy without good, solid, trustworthy data and information on which leaders and users can rely when making decisions, whether those decisions are of a business nature or a clinical nature. Because information is critical in every business decision and activity, it is essential that IG is part of the strategy to achieve business goals and objectives. This is why strategic alignment is the first and most foundational competency in AHIMA's Information Governance Adoption Model (IGAM).

Competing priorities, limited resources, and organizational culture are challenges that all organizations face as they start any major initiative. However, because IG is strategic, it actually helps with sorting out competing priorities by aligning information needs with the larger organizational business strategy. Because IG values information, it also helps to marshal limited resources and puts them where they are needed.

Several organizations have had governance processes in place for many years, in terms of decisions to invest in information technology. But now it's time to apply that same type of thinking and decision-making process to the information itself.

So while there are many challenges associated with starting an IG initiative, they can be transformed into opportunities for performance improvement as it relates to optimizing the management and use of information. In a broad sense, healthcare organizations need strategic alignment in order to:

- Focus energy, attention, and resources
- Eliminate redundancy
- Clarify scope
- Identify the capabilities and competencies which will improve organizational performance

As strategic planner Meir Liraz wrote, "Strategic alignment is the process and the outcome of linking your organizational structure and resources with your strategy and business environment to achieve performance improvement."¹

By standardizing, streamlining, simplifying, and identifying synergies related to an organization's information resources, IG can help to achieve organizational business strategies.

Another critical factor that cannot be overlooked or underestimated when discussing strategic alignment and IG is organizational culture. "Culture" is a powerful system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that govern how people behave.² This influences and dictates how people perform.

Information Governance Adoption Model



IG Case Study: Unity Health Care

The alignment of resources, the need to better leverage information, and organizational culture were all driving forces in Unity Health Care's decision to pursue an IG strategy. Below is a case study discussing Unity Health Care's IG initiative.

Organization Profile

Unity Health Care is an independent, non-profit organization designated as a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) and is the largest primary healthcare organization serving underserved populations in Washington, DC. With more than 500,000 patient visits annually, Unity's 980 staff members provide primary care services in internal medicine, pediatrics, family practice, and obstetric/gynecological medicine. Unity also offers dental care, social services, mental health services, family planning, treatment adherence, substance abuse counseling, and numerous specialized services (i.e., podiatry, cardiology, pulmonology, gastroenterology, psychiatry, ENT, ophthalmology, etc.) through a network of more than 25 health centers and a mobile medical outreach vehicle.

Strategic Direction

Unity decided to pursue IG to ensure that workforce members at every level have access to information needed to make decisions in real time. Unity decided to start with a narrower focus on data governance (one of the IGAM competencies), but eventually determined that a broader focus on IG would facilitate its goal of data-driven decision making.

IG can be an overwhelming prospect for any organization, but there was agreement that the initial focus should be data governance. Interestingly, IG was recognized to be such a critical enabler of strategy that, in this organization, the chief strategy officer in partnership with the chief informatics officer assumed the role of co-sponsors for the data and IG initiative.

The Challenge

With system-wide implementation of its electronic health record (EHR) system completed, Unity sought to optimize the use of clinical and other types of data for decision making at all levels of the organization. Unity recognized it had a valuable new source of information that could be used to leverage improvements in care quality as well as promote its strategies for population health management and other efforts to better serve its community.

The co-sponsors understood that they would need to address silos and develop standards and policies to accomplish this. A central objective was to get to a single source of truth for all core data elements in order to enable advanced use of data such as self-service reporting for care, quality, payment, and other purposes. It identified data governance as an essential organizational competency that it needed to develop. It also identified that education and engagement at the senior most levels of the organization and alignment with Unity's business strategies would be necessary to achieve the goal of data-driven decision making.

Approach and Implementation

Under the leadership of a core team of senior leaders, Unity:

- Identified a framework for guiding its data and information governance work
- Educated and engaged senior leaders
- Developed a set of goals that would provide a road map for data and information governance

The initial goals included:

- Supporting and enabling leadership to identify and select management benchmarks and consistently use them in decision-making
- Improving education and communication with staff about the data and analysis that goes into decision-making
- Establishing a business analytics department that would initially focus on one area, such as revenue cycle or clinical quality improvement, before extending broader capabilities

Some of the tactics they identified were:

- Identifying and educating data owners and data stewards for major information stores and data sets
- Establishing a data dictionary
- Developing policies and procedures for data and IG, including those related to data quality assurance, validation, and reporting
- Exploring available analytics software

Key to the approach was engaging with AHIMA's IGAdvisors™ and deployment of AHIMA's IGHealthRate™, an extensive structured self assessment of Unity's data and IG capabilities in which a team of stakeholders participated. Using such an assessment and other tools enabled Unity to educate senior leaders on data governance and analytics; identify data owners and stewards; create a core set of data elements, reports, and benchmarks, and develop data governance policies. In addition, the tools guided Unity in developing a charter for its data governance team.

Resulting Value/Benefit

Unity has identified the following benefits of its experience as an AHIMA IG site:

- Expanded recognition that data governance must evolve into and integrate with information governance
- Provided an "accountability" partner that helped to keep progress moving forward
- AHIMA's IG framework helped to clarify goals
- Provided helpful tools (assessment, tool kit, framework)
- Established clear goals and defined the difference between data governance and IG
- Ability to share feedback, perspective, and learning with other pilot sites

Lessons Learned from the IG Initiative

Unity learned the importance of creating a formal governance structure that will facilitate its vision of becoming a data-driven organization. Unity had experienced success with many of the operational aspects of IG, but was making little progress with strategic initiatives. Unity has been pleasantly surprised by the engagement of the senior leadership. They have found IG meetings are one of the most productive and creative meetings. This is an important aspect of their collaborative culture. Unity learned that by breaking down IG into small and manageable parts, they were able to build momentum for IG in the organization.

Business strategy in today's healthcare organizations relate very closely to the health system transformation that is currently under way. The bigger healthcare picture tells us that the nature and complexity of information itself, as well as the information needs of healthcare organizations, are changing. Not only must healthcare professionals consider the business needs for information inside the organization, but increasingly should provide information to and consume information from external sources as the transformation proceeds.

In the future, IG processes that extend beyond the walls of the organization to the larger healthcare ecosystem will be absolutely critical and must start internally.

When starting to think about IG and strategic alignment, consider the organization's culture and think about the ultimate destination. Does the organization have the cultural attributes that are critical for success? It is really important to know and understand the organization and what is likely to work and what won't work when starting to align IG with organizational strategy.

Notes

[1] Liraz, Meir. "[Strategic Planning: How to Develop a Strategic Plan for a Business](#)." *BizMove*.

[2] Madu, Boniface C. "[Organization culture as a driver of competitive advantage](#)." *Journal of Academic and Business Ethics*.

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