

Using Scenario Planning

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Do you ever wish you had a crystal ball to see into the future? Are you frustrated when your boss can't give you a straight answer about what is going to happen? Will there be more budget cuts? Will your clinic merge with that integrated delivery system? Should you volunteer to take over registration? With so many meetings and so much to do every day, musing about the future is probably at the bottom of your priority list. Why should you plan when everything changes so fast?

It's that rate of change, however, that must drive you to planning. When everything around you is in chaos, what would be more useful than a predetermined list of alternatives and already accomplished skills, tools, and relationships? So how do you plan for a future that is so unpredictable? The answer may be in a planning technique that is more about identifying the "what ifs" than about laying out a campaign.

This technique is called scenario planning and you may have heard or read about it, because the AHIMA Board of Directors used it to begin its Vision 2006 work. Scenario planning is defined as a "disciplined method for imaging possible futures" in Paul Schoemaker's article, "Scenario Planning: A Tool for Strategic Thinking."¹ It is not predicting the future, it is describing multiple futures. Schoemaker outlined the 10 steps below. In this article, we will present each step and provide an example of how it might apply to HIM planning. The transcription example that is developed is used for illustration only and is not meant to describe detailed scenarios or specific actions.

Step 1. Define the time frame and scope of analysis (programs, products, and technologies) and the knowledge that would have the greatest value to the organization.

In HIM, you might decide to look ahead five years and concentrate your analysis or planning around major activities, like computerization of the medical record, coding, or how merging with another hospital could affect HIM services.

Step 2. Identify the major stakeholders who will be most interested and affected by scenarios. In HIM, that might be administration, medical staff, employees, or the patients.

Step 3. Identify and briefly explain the basic trends, including how and why they exert influence on HIM services.

Brainstorming could be used to identify "drivers" or factors such as regulation, technology, or staff availability that affect the program you are analyzing. For example, the basic trend of more computerization of medical records fundamentally changes the collection and distribution of information.

Step 4. Identify events with uncertain outcomes that will most likely affect the organization.

An example of these uncertainties is acquisition or merger, or the purchase of usable speech recognition technology.

Step 5. Construct initial scenario themes. Using the trends and uncertainties identified in steps 3 and 4, start to imagine and describe various futures. The trends should be reflected in all of the scenarios, but the uncertainties should be deliberately varied. No more than four scenarios should be described. Limiting the number makes it less complicated and will help you to resist the desire to develop scenarios that are only different in detail and not in substance.

In a transcription planning scenario, you may identify trends such as:

- increased demand for a computerized record
- continued shortage of qualified staff
- decrease in funding for operations

Uncertainties might include:

- deployment of speech recognition technology
- acceptance of other data capture techniques

Then themes would be constructed that combine these trends and uncertainties. For example, speech recognition provides the solution for increased dictation and decreases operating costs by significantly reducing the required number of transcriptionists. Transcriptionists take on new roles as medical language specialists and transcription editors.

Step 6. Check scenario themes for consistency and plausibility, considering the time frame and possible outcomes of uncertainties.

In this step, check to see if the scenarios make sense. At this point, sharing them outside your initial planning team might be a good step. Ask questions like, "If the scenario time frame is five years for the transcription example above, is it reasonable that the technology described would exist?"

Step 7. Develop simple learning scenarios on which to base research and study. You may want to title these scenarios as a way to briefly describe and distinguish them.

Brief examples of scenarios about the future of a transcription service might look like this.

Scenario One: Hurrah for Speech Recognition. Dictation volume continues to skyrocket, but speech recognition works and has been deployed. Now, the remaining 40 percent of transcriptionists work as editors and monitor record completion in a real-time environment.

Scenario Two: Three Strikes, You're Out. Dictation volume grows exponentially. Speech recognition was tried but failed, and it will be a few years before clinicians are willing to try it again. Because dictation is the principal way information is captured for the record, transcription is a highly visible service. With a lack of local transcriptionists, you continually seek services or contract providers who can keep up with demand. Finally, management is blamed for these failures and fired. Because this does not fix the problem and the clinic can no longer support the function, it is put back to the individual physicians who either have to pay for their own transcriptionists or return to manual chart entries.

Scenario Three: EMR Saves the Day. Automation of the clinical record has moved forward and is accepted by clinicians. A majority of data is captured at the point of care directly into the computer through the use of biometric devices, touch screens, key pads and some speech recognition programs. Dictation volume has finally leveled off and now is used only for summaries and correspondence. Your early work to identify the unique role of text in the computer-based record and to advocate data collection through alternate means has finally paid off, and the transcription service contract is more than sufficient to maintain six-hour turnaround.

These examples are very brief, but demonstrate how playing the uncertainties against the trends creates three significantly different futures. Remember, this is the future we are talking about-the details do not yet exist. At this point, you are literally imaging and writing stories. These stories are based on those trends that you know to exist and on the uncertainties that differentiate the stories, but they remain stories. Again, the question to ask is: "are they possible?" not "which one will happen?"

Step 8. Identify areas of research or where you need more information on the factors that create these three scenarios.

Because you have imagined the effect the drivers may have on the future, you have a clearer view of what types of information you need to collect to refine or evaluate the scenarios.

Step 9. Develop quantitative models if complex interactions need to be assessed.

In our example, the effect of speech recognition on the productivity of transcriptionists or the costs of speech recognition versus traditional transcription might be areas where more quantitative analysis should be done.

Step 10. Evaluate the scenarios to see if they are complete, if they reflect the real issues, and if they are ready to be shared with others.

Now that the scenarios are finished, what have you gained? First, if you have done this well, you have a better appreciation of the issue and what is predictable and unpredictable about the future. Second, that knowledge is shared among the group of

people who crafted the scenarios and is more easily shared with other stakeholders. Third, you know what elements of the environment need to be continually assessed. Finally, you can plan actions that are appropriate regardless of which version of the future lies ahead. In our example, those might be:

1. build recognition of the roles dictation and transcription play in the development of the EMR
2. develop flexible staffing solutions
3. assure integration of transcription with current EMR deployment
4. investigate speech recognition technologies and current applications
5. investigate alternate data collection tools currently used and how they could replace transcription

By taking these steps now, you advance the current function and begin to prepare for a variety of futures.

It is very tempting to throw the planning baby out with the leadership bath water. A different approach to planning for the future may be to accept that it remains unknown until it becomes the present and to accept that you have limited control over what shape the future will take. The key is to see how you can affect the future and be prepared to act as opportunities arise.

Note

1. Schoemaker, P.J.H. "Scenario Planning: A Tool for Strategic Thinking." *Sloan Management Review* 36, no. 2 (1995): 25-40.

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