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For this CEO, IT helps drive performance

Gribbin says technology is a means to his greater goal: Seeing staff succeed

By Amanda Marquart

As CentraState Healthcare System began phasing in a new clinical information system in 2005, CentraState President and CEO John Gribbin focused on helping staff members internalize the “business case for change.” He schooled his executive team on change management techniques and spearheaded a “Star Trek”-themed internal marketing campaign meant to generate excitement about the new system among hospital staff.

“Our Project Enterprise message was about change, the future, conquering new challenges of healthcare,” says CentraState Chief Information Officer Indranil Ganguly. “Because of Gribbin’s directive, the team understood this new undertaking wasn’t about technology.”

Gribbin is one of three recipients of this year’s CEO IT Achievement Awards sponsored by *Modern Healthcare* and co-sponsored by the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society.

As part of the Project Enterprise campaign, Gribbin would write articles for staff newsletters and speak at nursing meetings. The campaign also included the creation of a dedicated intranet site, along with the scheduling of events and vendor fairs where clinicians could see, touch and play with the carts and other tools they would begin using.

Such efforts at laying the groundwork for the new system reduced the normally stressful and expensive period of go-live support from the typical six to eight weeks to a relatively smooth three-week support period.

The experience with the new system and the system’s vendor also set the precedent for how Gribbin works with other technology vendors to ensure measurable value is continually produced.

“We told (the vendor), ‘You’re going to be responsible for producing what you’re promising,’” Gribbin says. “We established metrics before the ink was dry—part of our arrangement is that we both have to produce. There was a sense of accountability on everyone’s parts—‘Show us the metrics that show how this will make an impact.’”

Gribbin always looks at the ability to gather metrics as the key to any IT

Gribbin, fourth from left, stands with staff members: Ganguly, Peg Kauth, Information Systems director; Andrew Davis, Information Systems project manager; and Messina.



initiative, says CentraState Chief Operating Officer Dan Messina. With the agreement, “This was unique—we formed a true partnership with (the vendor) to measure the value their applications could deliver,” Messina says.

Thanks to all the time Gribbin and his team devoted to doing baseline measurements, they were able to gather metrics to verify the new system’s positive impact on length of stay, cost per adjusted admission, and patient and employee satisfaction.

“The thinking was never, ‘How quickly will this get online’—it was, ‘How will we measure success?’” Messina says.

Gribbin takes the same calculated view on voluntary recognition programs. He sees the honors—such as *Modern Healthcare*’s Best Places to Work list, the American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet recognition program and the Joint Commission and disease-specific accreditation programs—as benchmarks against which to measure CentraState’s performance.

“John takes those elective award opportunities, flips them around and

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uses the rigid criteria as a checklist for us to drive performance improvement,” Messina says.

Gribbin has led CentraState to invest more than \$25 million in IT initiatives since joining the hospital as CEO in 2000. He sees CentraState’s position as a community hospital with limited resources as a motivator, rather than impediment, to adopt IT initiatives.

“IT is the great leveler among smaller and larger hospitals,” Gribbin says. “We don’t have as deep of pockets or as much cushion as some competitors. IT helps us disseminate information to everyone so all managers on the ground can make better decisions and fewer mistakes with less redundancy.”

Gribbin first became a major champion of IT in 1997 when as CEO of the Medical Center of Ocean County, Brick, N.J., he was tasked with merging the IT platforms of three hospitals, a responsibility he says gave him a more granular understanding of IT departments.

Nonetheless, the former pro soccer player—he played with the Baltimore Comets in the North American Soccer League for a season and a half before taking his first “real job” as a hospital’s statistical analyst—says he’s not technologically sophisticated but is interested in the computer’s role as “the disruptive technology of our lifetime.”

“With IT, I’m not fascinated with the technology itself,” Gribbin says. “I’m fascinated with how it’s transforming our society—and how it can help us serve people better.”

“He sees IT as another critical care tool—like a stethoscope,” Ganguly says.

Gribbin encourages business units to bring in their own IT proposals, present on what value they will deliver and then fully embrace whatever technologies they adopt. The units are then continuously responsible for showing how the technologies produce value—either in dollars, time saved, work intensity reduced, patient safety or provider affinity.

Having staff units take ownership of their technology programs has helped dispel the myth that the IT division is “some back office operation that fixes your computer,” rather than a partner in helping make clinicians’ lives easier and performance better, Ganguly says.

“If you can show nurses how IT helps them deal with patients—because they care only about that—they will get on board,” Gribbin says.

Gribbin, a fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives, has held leadership positions with the New Jersey Hospital Association,

the Central Jersey Blood Center, Monmouth-Ocean Hospital Service Corp. and the American Heart Association.

Ganguly, a member of the College of Healthcare Information Management

Executives and a fellow of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, says Gribbin encourages staff members toward professional development opportunities. “John believes we should be connected to our peers because there’s no single source of a great idea,” he says.

No matter who brings in an idea—whether it’s Gribbin or a staff member—each proposal is run through the same set of questions: How can this improve safety or productivity? What will the return on investment be? How do we benchmark and continually measure improvement? How will this be paid for?

Gribbin has several plans on CentraState’s IT horizon: the examination of meaningful-use criteria, increasing adoption of mobile technology, participation in a health information exchange and improving the user-friendliness of its computerized physician order-entry platform to drive up the percentage of computer-entered orders.

Under Gribbin’s direction, CentraState also recently hired its first full-time hospital informaticist, a physician executive who is meant to bridge the gaps between the clinical and IT standpoints.

“We want systems designed so physicians use them,” Gribbin says. The new informaticist will “be able to bridge the communication gap, anticipate what doctors will need, and carry the water both ways—to the doctors and from the doctors.”

That focus on his staff’s needs permeates Gribbin’s every decision—down to his request that the executive team use iPads or other tablet devices during management meetings to get a feeling for how mobile devices affect clinicians.

Gribbin says that to him, IT is a means to an end for his greater goal.

“What I like seeing is people succeed at what they do and seeing the way my staff develop—knowing I laid the groundwork for them,” Gribbin says. “Taking an organization and redefining what it means to be a community hospital—that’s a lot of fun.” <<

John Gribbin

**CentraState Healthcare System,
Freehold, N.J.**

Hospitals: 1
Employees: 2,400
Revenue: \$259 million
Net income: \$14.2 million*
Admissions: 16,000
Outpatient visits: 160,000
Annual IT budget: \$3.8 million

IT employees: 36
*Excess of revenue over expenses.
 Source: CentraState Healthcare System