



THE ACADEMY OF
HEALTHCARE REVENUE

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Prioritizing Project Management During System Conversions

As part of its 2010 research agenda, The Academy has explored strategies for successfully governing the implementation of new technologies. In the course of this research, a number of essential tactics have become evident: undertaking extensive project planning that sets out key performance metrics and establishes accountability for critical tasks; involving all impacted user groups in redesigning workflows; and dedicating resources to rigorous testing and training regimes.

When MedCentral Health System of central Ohio converted two hospitals to a new revenue cycle system, additional project management keys became clear—the importance of fostering commitment from process owners and executives, and ensuring adequate time for testing. The Academy recently spoke to the project manager of MedCentral's system conversion about the challenges and successes of their system conversion experience.

Involving End Users in the Design Phase

MedCentral's Mansfield Hospital is an acute care facility with 326 beds, while its Shelby Hospital is a 25-bed critical access hospital. Both sites recently converted to Siemens Healthcare Soarian® Financials revenue cycle management system in 2006. Fred Crowgey, Project Director, says that a vital step was formally identifying the business goals of the conversion, a process that included requesting input from end users. This step encouraged active involvement of team members who would be affected by the conversion.

"From the very start, the system conversion was regarded as a clinical project and a financial project, not an IT project. That led to bringing in the end users to help identify what key features and functions the different systems have," Crowgey explains.

Crowgey and his team began by interviewing key executives about their goals for the new system—including the CFO, the chief nursing officer, the heads of ancillary clinical departments, the VP of medical affairs, and the VP of marketing and strategic development. Once business goals had been established, select vendors were invited to present their systems to hospital personnel. The systems were evaluated based on features, functions, and user interface. Ultimately, hospital leaders identified Soarian® Financials and Clinicals (Siemens' clinical health information system)

MedCentral Health System
Mansfield, Ohio

- Number of Hospitals: 2
- Bed Size: 351

as the products most closely aligned with the goal of leveraging the new system to redesign workflows.

After the system had been selected, workgroups were created to bridge the gap between current and future processes so that the system could be designed accordingly. During the design phase, 12 to 15 business office workgroups—including registrars, billers, cashiers, helpdesk reps, and CDM maintenance personnel—were organized by function to contribute. Each workgroup had an executive sponsor responsible for ensuring the group had an agenda with specific deliverables, there was accountability for those deliverables, and formal policies and procedures would be enacted to support process changes necessitated by the new system.

Thorough Testing, Training

Concerning the implementation of hospital information systems, Crowgey also emphasizes the importance of spending time on thorough testing, particularly since revenue cycle processes are so interdependent. "It's a true cycle, so if you divide testing up into unit testing instead of integrated testing, you're going to miss a lot of steps in your software build," says Crowgey.

For MedCentral's conversion, unit testing was completed first to ensure individual functions met user expectations, followed by integrated testing. Integrated testing involved processing the account for a dummy patient through to adjudication. During this phase, the hospital ran more than 220 different test scripts through the system to account for different patient experiences. In MedCentral's case, integrated testing lasted almost four weeks.

"You could have a patient that comes in the ED, is transferred to observation, and eventually admitted as an inpatient," Crowgey explains. "You need to test the system as you move that patient through those different levels of care to make sure everything is accurately reflected on the billing."

Training is certainly another major concern for hospitals undergoing system conversions. MedCentral's internal training department designed approximately 30 to 40 computer-based training modules for new processes. During the design phase, a trainer was integrated into each workgroup. The trainer captured screenshots of the new system and reviewed new policies and procedures as they were being formulated, then designed educational materials for end users based on this information.

Additional Success Factors

In tandem with the lessons described above, Crowgey stresses the value of having an engaged executive sponsor to create a positive system conversion experience. Although the IT department may have primary responsibility for implementation, the end users do not report to IT. Therefore, it is important for an executive sponsor to assume ownership of the project in terms of communicating goals and needs to department heads, supervisors, and ultimately end users. Crowgey says that MedCentral's CEO remained actively involved throughout the system conversion. "He was instrumental in making sure different groups came to a consensus about how we were going to design the system. We continue to use that model for all our IT projects now," Crowgey explains.

By developing business goals at the onset and creating avenues for user input, MedCentral was able to realize significant revenue cycle improvements through its accounting system conversion. Following the implementation, MedCentral was able to reduce its gross A/R days from 73 in 2007 to 48 in 2010, a new low.

Undergoing a major system conversion is a challenge for any organization, and it is possible to become so consumed with learning new features and processes that the overall project plan receives less attention than it should. However, MedCentral's system conversion experience emphasizes that dedicating ample time and resources to project management is essential to successfully implementing new technologies in the revenue cycle. 

