

The Role of Communications in IT Implementations

The implementation of an enterprise-wide technology solution, such as an electronic medical record (EMR) system, is a complex and costly undertaking. Most organizations approach this endeavor with a primary focus on the installation of the hardware and software, even though by itself the technology adds little or no value. The true value and benefit to the organization is realized only in the actual use of the system by clinicians and staff as they go about their work day-to-day.

To achieve meaningful use that results in improved patient safety, higher quality clinical outcomes, cost efficiencies and other myriad benefits, it is critical for organizations embarking on an EMR implementation to broaden their focus to include comprehensive strategies that encompass their people, to ensure they are ready and willing to use the system effectively in their work. When individual clinicians are supported and have agreed to go through the personal disruption of change, the system will be used with acceptance and understanding, and the organization will achieve the desired results.

Achieving Long-term Benefits

Research has shown that for any organization implementing a large-scale system, the challenge is not getting the system installed—it's achieving the long-term benefits. ACIO study indicates that 82% of CIOs surveyed cited user resistance as the top reason for major IT implementation failure.¹ Users often resist the new system and consequent changes in daily work habits, resulting in passivity, active avoidance, or even sabotage of the system. Additionally, most users, especially clinicians, learn just enough of the system to “get through the day” at go-live, and organizations do not plan for ongoing training and interventions to ensure users master advanced levels of proficiency that generate value to the organization.

To ensure a successful implementation, it is necessary to establish a strong function that focuses on the people side of the implementation, also referred to as technology adoption. A key component of both the technical implementation and technology adoption is the communications function. Many studies have identified that effective communication is a critical success factor in large-scale systems implementation.

Furthermore, in today's health care environment leaders are managing multiple key initiatives simultaneously, with most requiring some level of communication to key stakeholders. The complexity increases as we have learned that the various stakeholder groups, (physicians, nurses, etc.), have distinct preferences for how they prefer to receive information and what types of communications they deem important. How does leadership communicate within this hectic environment and, most importantly, ensure their messages are being heard?

A well-positioned vision for the initiative that is linked to the organization brand sets the stage for user acceptance and support of the vision.

Getting the Message

The implementation of an electronic medical record system presents many significant complexities due to the nature of the health care environment and the array of departmental interdependencies. An effective communication strategy needs to include a multi-phase approach to accommodate the messages and deliverables for each identified phase of the implementation, in addition to identifying the preferred vehicles by function. For example, physicians may prefer receiving messages via email while nurses and medical assistants might prefer receiving information from their supervisor at a department meeting. And to add additional complexity, those preferences can change as one moves closer to training and go-live.

The starting place for an effective communication strategy is to develop a clearly articulated vision for the initiative that links to the organizational brand. By applying branding strategies and creating a compelling position for the initiative, the long-term vision is established, which in turn sets the stage for acceptance and support of the significant change that will take place across the entire organization.

¹ Deloitte Annual CIO Survey

Contributor: Kelly J. Fadel, Ph.D.
in Information Systems

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Guidelines

Based on our in-depth experience in leading communications for multiple EMR implementations, we offer the following guidelines.

1. Distinguish and prioritize the system implementation.

Create a comprehensive view of the 'big picture': why the organization is making the investment in the new system.

- Demonstrate how the system facilitates/enables the organizational vision.
- Establish the priority to the organization and leadership commitment.
- Position the initiative for the optimal communication strategy and implementation

2. Communicate leadership support

Users expect active involvement of and support from organizational leadership. This support should be communicated regularly through visible leadership involvement throughout the implementation process.

3. Communicate realistically

Employees want a realistic idea of what is in store for them. They want to know not only the advantages of the new system, but also the challenges they may face when learning to use the system, how the new system will impact them personally, and how it will change the way they do their jobs.

4. Utilize a broad range of communication vehicles

With significant differences in the way different job functions perceive communications, it is important that an intelligent portfolio of communication vehicles be constructed to provide multiple opportunities for user audiences to receive the information they need.

5. Communicate early and frequently

Users prefer frequent, short, on-target communications delivered through a broad range of vehicles. Early and frequent communication helps to build a core body of knowledge and enthusiasm that sets the stage for success.

The ultimate goal of a successful technology implementation is to ensure that end users are ready and able to use the technology to do their job on the day of go-live. While communications alone does not produce ready end users, it is a key component in a comprehensive change management/technology adoption approach. Linking the role of communications with the overall project plan is a key component for creating a ready environment.

We welcome you to contact us for additional information and to learn how Bromberg Consulting can help you with your enterprise-wide technology implementation.