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HIT Staffing Considerations for Health Centers

Information technology (IT) is playing an increasingly important part in how you run your health center. Imagine you are having dinner with one of your Board members and she says, "You know, we've made large investments in new software, in upgrading hardware and in integrating everything. But, did we staff it as effectively as we could have?" That's a very good question. Answering it requires you to know what information technology your health center is currently using, how it's using it, and what IT it will need in the near future. All this, in turn, requires knowing what issues you are trying to address by using IT and then translating that into what attributes the people who will work with this technology will need. It seems like a big effort, but actually you already know most of this.

At the highest level, the use of information technology is aimed at increasing productivity. That is, improving the processes you use to deliver patient care and to run your business more efficiently. These processes include:

- management of patient demographic data
- scheduling of patient appointments
- efforts related to quality and disease registry
- management of scheduling, front office processes and other logistics
- management of billing and reimbursement
- oversight of federal and other reporting requirements for UDS
- accounting processes
- financial and business planning efforts for actually running the business

Over the past few years, you may have addressed these requirements by using a practice management system for managing patient information, doing

electronic billing and managing reimbursement, and possibly using an accounting system for your financial planning and reporting, and a chronic disease management system (CDMS) for quality reporting and disease registry. More recently, it has meant selecting and deploying an EMR, or electronic medical record system, so that you can make better use of clinical data for treatment and reporting. Of course, all of this has to be integrated so that you can reuse information, cut down on duplicate data and share information across your health center (and possibly with other health centers and health care organizations through a health information exchange, or HIE). This is a lot of software, and you haven't even started thinking about the hardware yet.

Even before you think about hardware, you have to think about your network. The EMR will require a higher speed network both inside your health center and a broader bandwidth internet connection. Then there is the hardware required to run the network.

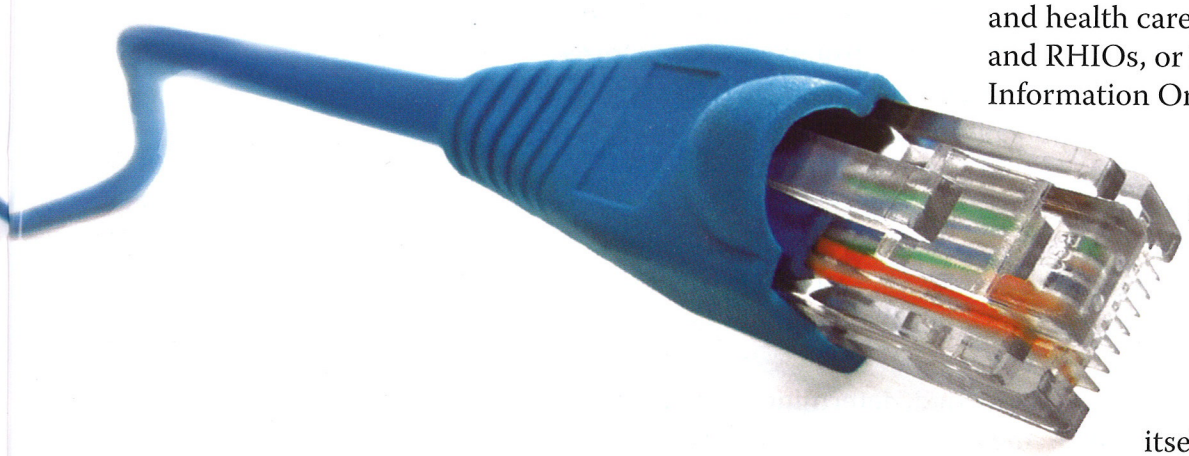
But in order for your IT operations to run optimally, you need to have appropriate staffing. What attributes must your workforce possess? Here is one view of those attributes and requirements based on my experience:

Management Skills. The first set of skills your people will need relate to process and project management. These are the skills that enable you to plan and carry out projects that are successful, on time and within budget. In my experience, much of this is common sense, but there are many professional associations and software products that provide guidelines and programmed processes to develop and manage process and projects.

Vendor Liaison Skills. A second set of skills is required for vendor liaison-related duties. You will need to select a vendor for your network and for hardware and software, and you will need to manage those vendor relationships so that your health center can take advantage of financial incentives as well as upgrades and improvements as they become available. Vendor relationships are very important to your health center as good relations can ensure that your costs are minimized and your service is maximized, and personnel experience in vendor interaction, communication and management is essential.

Technology Skills. Your health center needs technology-related skills in networking, hardware and software. The three attribute areas that all of these technologies share are:

- *Deployment:* the installation and set-up of the technology.
- *Management:* the ongoing monitoring and optimization of the technology.
- *Maintenance:* the upgrading for error and issue correction as well as provision of new features for the technology.
- *Integration:* interconnection of health care products and aggregation of information for use within a health center and with other health centers and health care organizations (HIEs and RHIOs, or Regional Health Information Organizations).



Each technology has uniquely detailed attributes that require different skills. A good deal of knowledge about the technology itself, standards, optimal deployment models and current best practices for management and maintenance practices are

necessary. This knowledge has to be adjusted against the health center's technical requirements for the amount and types of data to be managed, number of encounters, number and type of users, etc., so that recommendations can be made for technology acquisition, deployment and maintenance.

So how do you get this particular mix of IT skills and experience at your health center? There is no one way to staff a health center to provide this expertise. Matching existing employees' skills to these attributes is a good initial step. The real question is do you want to have your own staff to deal with these skills and the tasks to which they are applied, or do you want to "buy" this expertise, either through contracting with a company to provide people to do your IT tasks, or possibly through a health center network that would provide IT capability. Here are the options and related pros and cons:

Option 1: Buy the Expertise

If you buy, you will transfer some of the responsibility to your vendor or partner. You will still be responsible for negotiating the exact capabilities and services to be provided as well as levels of service. You will also need people at your center that will constantly have to monitor and oversee the work done by your partner.

Option 2: Hire Internal Staff

If you choose to staff IT in your health center, then your people will be responsible for the everyday tasks of deploying and keeping everything running. They will also be responsible for fixing things when something breaks or changes, and you can't schedule or bill or do your daily closes. Of course, you'll have more control because the people doing the work actually work for you. My experience is that this is not always as great a solution as it seemed to be when you made the decision to augment staff.

Option 3: The Combination: Buy a Piece, Hire a Few

The third option is to staff part of your IT needs internally and to contract for the rest. You may decide that specific types of tasks can and should be done internally, or that you already have the capability in-house to support them. And you may find that you will want to contract out the large deployment and maintenance tasks especially for critical failures, even if you do have staff in-house. Many health centers have found that this is the best solution and have joined a health center controlled network.

The health center controlled network provides the high level expertise required for more sophisticated IT functions such as connectivity between sites, back up, security, electronic medical records support and training and disaster planning allowing health center staff to focus on the day-to-day operations of the center.

No matter how you provide IT capability in your health center, you will still need to understand the capabilities that must be provided, determine how best to meet those needs, understand the actual costs involved over time and also understand the benefits and challenges of each choice. And regardless of how you provide this IT capability, it will not only get more important over the next few years, it will become essential.

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