Making Tough Decisions to Address Health IT Challenges

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Having served as a chief information officer (CIO) for three different large and complex healthcare provider organizations over the past 17 years, I can truly say that much has changed in both healthcare and technology. Yet, they are not moving nearly fast enough. We are all moving fast, working a lot of hours, and juggling more priority projects than we can handle. But despite this pace, there are common challenges that just don’t seem to get the traction they need.

I’ll highlight some of them here: interoperability, systems integration, and innovation.

Every CIO is dealing with the inadequate state of interoperability between organizations and integration between internal systems. We are exchanging data between healthcare providers in our local regions to better support patient care, but it is uneven. Some parts of the country are much further ahead. It takes a focused effort to rise above competitive differences, find common goals, and develop a sustainable business model for health information exchanges to succeed.

Within any healthcare provider organization, there may be thousands of different applications. Even if you have fully implemented a single, integrated electronic health record (EHR), you will still have hundreds of applications and integration points to ensure seamless workflows and minimize duplicate entry and workarounds. It takes a diligent effort by leadership and a willingness by individual departments to give up some functionality in the niche “best-of-breed” solutions. If you do, you can simplify the applications environment and reduce the number of applications and integration points. It sounds good, but most organizations don’t get as far as they’d like when heading down this path.

So, what’s to be done? Within the industry, we must push for increased standardization and lean on our core vendors to provide broad functionality. Within our own organizations, we must be willing to make the tough decisions to simplify our application portfolios. The potential exists for cost savings, less downtime, and simpler workflows for our clinicians. Who can argue with those benefits?

Regarding innovation, most CIOs I’ve met along with their information technology (IT) teams are passionate about making a difference and improving healthcare through technology. However, they are too often consumed with “keeping the trains running” by implementing and supporting the core systems. CIOs want to get past core EHR implementation and optimization efforts that support unique workflow needs and move on to other needed solutions and innovations.

Because IT departments are too often consumed by the core work, a focus on innovation frequently occurs outside the IT department and may be led by chief innovation officers, chief digital officers, and others. All projects eventually need IT support, so it’s better to start with an IT partnership on day one.

Beyond that critical partnership, the organization’s culture must support innovation. It needs to be nimble enough to introduce and fund new technologies in small pilots with a plan and commitment to rapidly scale once the technology is proven. This can be a challenge with annual budget cycles. Organizations should carve out funds for new, game-changing innovations to retain a competitive position in our patient-centric and consumer-driven healthcare market.

Just stop and think about all the consumer apps and easy-to-use online services that you’re accustomed to in your day-to-day world. Then, think about how much of that is available through your healthcare provider. Yes, we’ve got a long way to go yet!

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