Columns

LEADERSHIP

Strong IT Liaisons Prove Their Worth

Carol Muhlbaumer

As information systems become increasingly integrated, projects within information systems departments are becoming progressively more complex and require expertise and input from an interdisciplinary team. Nowhere is this more apparent than when a fully integrated health information system is selected with a commitment to utilize all available features. How can an IT department with limited resources succeed?

The strength of the liaison base comes from their expert knowledge of the operations within their department and a willingness to master the primary software systems that support their workflow. Each department takes responsibility for this liaison resource, whether full- or part-time, from their respective operating budgets. In very few instances is the resource capitalized in a project’s budget.

With this commitment, there is a consistent avenue to communicate with departments during a time of change, from an associate who is respected as a co-worker. Each is paired with an IT analyst to achieve consistent support and maximization of software features. With the rapid cycle of change that comes with implementing and maintaining software, having an associate grounded in departmental process serving as the educator and first-level support can enable swifter acceptance of new processes.

How It’s Structured

Under the program’s structure, departmentally-based liaisons are assigned to work with the IT department on projects that directly or indirectly affect their specialties. In most instances, this is a voluntary program, with the department’s manager selecting an appropriate representative. Some are full-time information systems coordinators dedicated to developing and maintaining unit-specific software.

This approach comes from the department’s commitment to becoming fully electronic or the number of associates requiring support within the department. At this time, our liaison base includes more than 40 staff, including nursing, billing, accounting, pharmacy, labora-
tory, radiology, medical records, risk management, admissions, registration, scheduling, visiting nurse, emergency department, OB/GYN, cath lab and endoscopy lab specialists. Monthly meetings of the liaison base enable communication of current projects’ progress, with the expectation that the liaison will disseminate information within their departments. Depending on the scope of projects, the liaisons may be required to meet more frequently.

It is important to manage this team by coordinating with their managers to relieve them of their principal responsibilities. Communicating impending IT needs is imperative, from conception to go-live.

The success of this program is directly related to the support IT receives from department directors. It has taken many years to change the mindset of operating managers. If an associate is serving a dual role of IT support and front-line responsibilities, the department’s needs must always take priority. More time is being factored into these associates’ schedules to be out of the mainstream and focus on project work, and this change represents a definite shift from the past.

Finding a way to show how valued this team is to the organization is paramount to the success of the program. Celebrations and rewards for successful implementations are key means of enabling the organization and information systems department to thank these associates and encourage them to continue in their roles. This can be in the form of luncheons or bonuses for exceptional work.

This structure has enabled the successful implementation of complex systems—electronic clinical documentation, picture archiving and communications systems, phlebotomy bar coding and an upgrade of the HCIS as a beta site. As the facility begins its implementation of an electronic medication administration record, computerized practitioner order entry and an electronic health record, the importance of care providers as liaisons is coming to the forefront.

While the work ahead is daunting; the commitment and message to the organization from this group must be consistent. Their leadership role and confidence in the system they are supporting will influence peers to participate as well. The challenge will come in recruiting a physician liaison and champion—it needs to be a leader in the organization, someone who embraces technology yet someone who will represent and defend the needs of community physicians.

As the demands increase to support a complete electronic health record, the burden on this group will only grow. Clinical documentation, pharmacy, radiology and laboratory systems will become the keystone of future endeavors. Considerations in the future to move the funding of these associates into the IT department is necessary, but only if they remain physically located in the departments they support. A liaison’s value is in experiencing first-hand the impact of the information systems on the department they support.

These valued associates are, and will continue to be, the reason for successful implementations of technology. Working with management in those departments continues to be a challenge that lessens as a project’s success proves its worth. By having knowledgeable, consistent support internally based, the IT department benefits from their experience, and their department benefits by obtaining a product that is tailored to its workflow.

Starting a Program

Starting a liaison program is usually precipitated by an organizational IT need. Senior management support must be sought, and once it’s obtained, IT must meet with departmental management, allowing them to choose the appropriate associate. It is important to set realistic expectations of the time commitment necessary for each project, and education funded by the IT department to improve skills must be included. Each liaison must be paired with an IT resource to enable cross-training if the liaison is unavailable. Consistent communication is necessary to ensure that no department will be adversely affected by an IT initiative.

The benefits of an organizational interdisciplinary team to assist in implementing and supporting healthcare-related software are realized immediately because all departments have expert representation reviewing upcoming and ongoing projects. Each can clearly analyze the impact of new technology on their departments. In the long term, because there’s a shortage of experienced analysts, building this internal base of support can potentially fill new and vacated IT positions.

About the Author

Carolyn Muhlbauer is assistant director of applications, development and support at Doylestown Hospital, with more than 25 years of experience in healthcare, the last seven being in the MIS department. Her responsibilities include support, development and implementation of all clinical, administrative and financial software applications.