Electronic Health Records Start with an In-Depth Strategic Assessment
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As a senior specialist at Dell Perot Systems, I have been involved recently in several consulting engagements pertaining to strategic planning for Electronic Health Records (EHR). Each project has addressed unique challenges and our strategic assessments and recommendations have varied based on the hospital's environment and stage of readiness. One interesting thing that we have seen is that EHR initiatives go far beyond achieving "meaningful use" as defined by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The initiatives address the core values of care delivery organizations, providers, and physician practices to improve healthcare quality and achieve patient safety goals.

We've also validated that EHR is not simply another IT project. EHR affects all facets of the hospital including executives, staff, physicians, care givers, administrators, providers and impacts clinical and business applications and processes. As such, EHR is truly an organization wide, clinically-driven initiative that is a most critical part of the organization's strategic goals and long term objectives.

I've had the pleasure to work with several hospitals, providing them with our EHR Strategic Planning Service. The service is focused on working with hospitals to assess their organizational readiness for EHR and helping to provide them with recommendations for developing a strategic plan and timeline to achieve successful implementation of EHR technology.

As part of the readiness assessment, our team performs an in-depth organizational evaluation that encompasses every critical area of hospital operations:

- Core application readiness – Applications are utilized to maximum capacity, with up-to-date dictionaries. Advanced clinical applications are implemented or planned for (i.e. NUR/PCS, PCM, EDM, ORM, and BMV). Tools and knowledge are in place for quality reporting.
- Operational processes – Are streamlined and standardized across the organization. "Pain points" in processes are understood and the organization is ready to address. The organization has a change management and project management structure in place. Formal medication reconciliation is in place and performed at relevant encounters.
- Executive and clinician engagement – Management and staff are currently engaged and have adopted the current system functionality. The hospital's Physician Steering Committee is in place and a physician champion is identified.
- Overall management of existing applications – The existing MEDITECH applications are managed and supported by the department with guidance by the IT department to ensure integration. "Super Users" are in place and up-to-date on current processes. Education infrastructure exists to carry the organization through the migration.

- IT enablement – Third party applications are fully integrated at the data field level into the EHR. Compliance with current HIPAA Privacy and Security Rules. Health Information can be provided in an electronic format.
- It is important to note that while technology lays the foundation and framework to support these changes, it is the process changes that will have the most dramatic affect on every clinician, physician, provider, and employee, and that's where we spend much of our time.
- During the assessment, we focus on the status of core clinical applications, such as Laboratory, Pharmacy, and Radiology, because they are the foundation for the advanced clinical applications and physician initiatives that will lead to meaningful use. It is critical that we gain a deep understanding of the penetration of technology from every perspective. We often spend a week or more on site, interviewing as many as 60 people hospital-wide, including executives, physicians, nurses, clinicians, and administrators. And because our consulting team is comprised of former healthcare professionals themselves, we are able to bring a high level of understanding of the hospital environment to the discussions.

Through this systematic approach, we identify any gaps in staff, resources, and technology and evaluate the clinical applications that will be necessary to achieve meaningful use of an EHR. Our deliverables include strategic planning recommendations and a timeline for implementation. We develop a realistic timeline — one that takes into consideration the organization's available resources and current and planned IT projects. Our close relationship with MEDITECH also enables us to bring an understanding of new technologies and applications that may emerge and have an impact on the strategic plan.

Our EHR projects take on many shapes and forms and each one is unique. For example, at Huntsville Memorial Hospital, in Huntsville, Texas, we were asked to perform an EHR Assessment with a focus on ARRA readiness. The assessment included a "current state" review of all in-place information technology that will factor into an EHR, an executive workshop focusing on the common understanding of the meaningful use guidelines for hospitals, a facilitated "work session" to examine the elements/characteristics of a "meaningful" EHR and a viable MEDITECH roadmap to achieving an EHR.

After we completed the assessment and delivered our recommendations, Huntsville Memorial's Director of Information Systems, John Heemann, CCNA, MCSE, was pleased to note: "We now feel we have a greater understanding of ARRA and the specific impact it will have on Huntsville Memorial as we work toward achieving meaningful use. The strategic assessment was instrumental in identifying disparities in our applications and processes and I feel we now have a viable strategic plan and roadmap to achieve our goals that has the additional credibility of having been vetted by Dell Perot Systems."

At Grady Memorial Hospital, in Chickasha, Oklahoma, we were asked to evaluate their MEDITECH environment and present options for moving forward on the current MAGIC platform or migrating to 6.0 as well as addressing considerations to gain physician and clinician buy-in.

Upon completion of the assessment, Sylvia Ho, Grady Memorial's Director of IT said: "With Dell Perot Systems' help, we now have clear guidance for implementing an EHR on either platform. Their analysis of our governance structure and recommendations for physician and clinician engagement and change management methodologies will help us during the hospital-wide process transformations that will be required to achieve an EHR."

I'm looking forward to a very busy and interesting year as we help more MEDITECH hospitals develop a strategic plan and roadmap to implement EHR technology.

Robert Walker is a former healthcare CIO and Senior Specialist at Dell Perot Systems. He specializes in the development of strategic plans for hospital wide implementation and operation of services, clinical/financial decision support systems, desktop support, patient and end-user satisfaction, and employee training. Email Robert at meditechsolutions@dell.com.