Esther Apter

Observation Deck

Engaging Technology

Are you falling short in how you can leverage IT to revitalize your HME business?

Using technology to streamline operations is an excellent step toward improving productivity and increasing profits. However, it is all too common to see providers take the first step toward digitizing their business but then stall and never reach full productivity potential. Replacing a manual activity with technology in a process doesn't necessarily improve the workflow. In fact, automating a broken process will only increase the speed in which errors are generated.

Here are three common examples where providers attempt to use technology to improve efficiency, but take too small of a step to have a huge impact:

Document Imaging

Unburdening your office of paper files can feel like a literal weight off of your operations. Instead of filing paper documents, you scan or import the documentation and place it in a digital repository. But, if you store the documents electronically at the same point as a paper version would have been filed, the process has not changed. This is quite common when document storage is an add-on to software where its main purpose is something else (e.g. billing software). We call it document imaging versus the alternative of real document management. While you've saved time some time and money by reducing the physical movements needed to file or retrieve documents, a lot of inefficiency remains in the system.

Document management systems eliminate the paper altogether. Paper does not get scanned or imported at the point it would have been filed, but rather at the point it is received by the organization. You eliminate having to move physical paper through the workflow as different people or processes are needed to work with or reference the document. You empower your people to be able to get their work done, according to standards, with all the information they need at the click of a button.

True document management can free up an exponential amount of time and money. It is much more powerful than being a digital warehouse. It is a centralized resource for storing and collaborating on any kind of information including word or text documents, pictures, spreadsheets and even custom data captured through digital forms. It goes beyond patient files and intake and claims into AP, HR, legal contracts, and so on. You go paperless in your entire operation, front to back, top to bottom. With true document management you don't just change and improve how information is stored, you change and improve how the work gets done.

Fax Management

Faxing is one of the most common forms of communication in healthcare. Considered a point-to-point solution, it is often thought of as the most secure way to transmit personal health information and share documents across locations. In recent years, there has been a move away from physical fax machines to fax servers, which allow you to send and receive faxes through your computer's internet connection. Using an electronic faxing solution saves the physical movement of getting up from your desk to send and receive faxes. You don't have to wonder if there are any documents waiting to be picked up from the fax machine, as you get a real-time notification. However, the only part of the process that has been advanced through the use of technology is the literal send and receive portion. The workflows surrounding fax distribution and the actual working of the faxes remain unchanged and inefficient.

In most cases, fax servers distribute faxes to email addresses. As a manager, how do you know the faxes have been received by the appropriate person and are being worked correctly? If the email address distributes a fax to multiple employees, how do they know who is responsible for handling it and avoid duplication of effort – or worse: no effort at all because they think the other is handling it? What if the fax number only goes to one person — how do you know it went into the inbox or wasn't lost in the spam filters, and how do you handle it if that employee is absent?

Further, there could be security concerns. Have you set your fax server to transmit to your email server in a HIPAA-compliant fashion?

If you centralize the management of your faxes through a business process management application (BPM) that automates workflows for inbound faxes, you can not only ensure nothing falls through the cracks, you also have tools you can access to monitor progress and allocate resources as needed. For outbound faxes, a good BPM tool can help you transmit with a few clicks, directly from within your document (rather than having to open a separate portal) and it also keeps track of what is outstanding and requires follow up. Moving from a physical fax machine to a fax server is a great first step, but there are many more steps to be taken to ensure you stay on top of one of your most important communication tools.

Reporting

Business analytics are critical in tracking progress, identifying areas for improvement, and optimizing resource allocation. One of the great things about using technology as the backbone of your business is the ready availability of data and metrics to power essential reporting. So why do so many companies rely on spreadsheet software and manual data entry to perform essential analysis?

There are two ways reporting is frequently not used to its full potential. The first is in the continued manual effort in reporting: Data is extracted from your business software, but then needs to be heavily manipulated through spreadsheets, pivot tables, and additional formulas. It not only creates additional work where it's supposed to be saving you effort, but it creates additional opportunities for human error. Your business applications should be able to give you the exact data you need, when you need it. Most software companies can create custom reporting for you and there also exists reporting applications or BPM software that can act as a hub to pull together information from multiple sources into a single spot. The job of software isn't just to collect data; it's to provide it back to you in a complete and usable fwormat. If your business applications are not doing this for you and you are assigning work, tracking progress, and reporting results through manual spreadsheets, you are missing a tremendous opportunity to save additional time and resources.

The second way reporting is used correctly is in the timeliness of reports. When done correctly, reporting should help with decision making every day. It shouldn't be a monthly or quarterly exercise in looking in the rear view mirror. Business analytics should be as real time as you want them to be and help you maximize productivity every day that you operate. Dashboards, scheduled reporting and meta-reporting from multiple sources should give you the information and insight you need to guarantee that the end-of-the-month summary reports show positive gains.

Providers must recognize the with the inadequacy of combining one-off systems of email, fax servers, to-do lists, simple task managers, spreadsheets and rigid workflow products and expecting the results you would get from a true, end-to-end business process management tool. To create the most efficient operation possible, you need to break the entire process down into its parts — the who, the what, the when — and rebuild it in an optimized and integrated way. Technology can absolutely be the framework to allow you to do this, but it takes the right tools, such as customizable business process management software, and the motivation to maximize those tools to make true efficiency a reality. ■

> Esther Apter is the founder and CEO of HME software company Medforce Technologies (www.medforcetech.com). With a 25-year focus on increasing provider efficiency and profitability for, she is also the founder of medical billing company Healthcare Management Solutions (HMS).

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