

DENVER

BUSINESS JOURNAL

MAY 25-31, 2007

Why technology alone can't save health care

From iPods and cell phones to flat-screen televisions, it's difficult (and incredibly expensive) to stay up to date with the latest technology.

Try facing that same challenge in an industry where technology advancements are unremitting, investments are in the millions, and the impact of successfully integrating and adopting new technology is a matter of life or death.

In the health care industry, a serious problem persists: Advancements in technology are quickly outpacing the end-user's ability to adopt and apply innovations in equipment and software. The gap continues to widen as decision-makers focus on the countless details involved with installation rather than the critical issue of adoption.

While politicians, scholars and health care leaders debate potential solutions, there is one axiom that goes without argument: Caregivers must keep pace with new technology and innovation, if there's ever a chance to provide quality care at an affordable cost.

Because technology holds the promise of helping health care professionals be more efficient, some experts continue to support the notion that higher-quality, more-affordable care lies primarily in enhanced information technology. But, even with current technology and equipment, as many as 98,000 Americans die each year as a result of preventable medical errors. Statistics like these indicate that technology alone is not the answer.

So the question remains: Can many of the health care industry's challenges be solved simply by purchasing the newest software and equipment?

Implementing advanced technology is an important part of the solution. Hospitals and other health care organizations in Denver and across the country are integrating new technology, such as computerized physician order entry (CPOE) and electronic medical record (EMR) systems, to improve accuracy and efficiency.

But even with these advancements, providers often overlook technology adoption, or to ensure that health care professionals are

proficient in the technology before using it to treat patients.

When health care leaders make end-user adoption a top priority — and implement all of the necessary components, such as change leadership, effective communication and hands-on simulation training — they can be more confident about realizing their return on technology investments.

Placing the focus on better adoption, rather than mere implementation, sounds simple, but the reality is that it can take a substantial investment of time, money and energy — resources that are in short supply.

But there's some good news. As technology evolves, so does the process for learning and adopting new technology. More providers than ever now employ innovative ways to quickly incorporate new technology into daily job functions.

The first step in this transition is realizing traditional training just isn't working. In fact, train-the-trainer programs and one-shot classroom instruction, often supplied by the technology provider, are the poorest choices to drive end-user adoption.

Gone are the days of traditional classroom training, such as lectures and demonstrations, which have become impractical because of lost time with patients and limited retention rates. Instead, today's most innovative health care organizations are using learning tools such as on-site coaching coupled with Web-based simulations, putting health care professionals in real-world situations where they can gain practical experience with new technology.

Further, the process has become more customized. Instead of providing generalized, blanket training for everyone, smart health care organizations are communicating how the technology directly affects the specific jobs each clinician performs on a daily basis.

With improved learning mechanisms in place, the time it takes to become proficient is drastically cut, often from months to just a few days. When applied to hundreds or thousands of employees, the impact is exponential.

So, what does improved technology adoption actually mean for health care organizations? How does it affect the bottom line? When reviewing technology systems and products, one of the biggest factors to con-

sider is return on investment. In other words, how will the investment in new technology pay off? Will we reduce errors, serve more patients and become more efficient or more profitable? The goal: all of the above, in a fraction of the time compared with traditional training efforts.

The issue of technology adoption isn't limited to the health care industry. Integrating new technology into any organization is complex. Regardless of industry, there are some proven fundamentals that can help translate into immediate results:

- **Focus on leading change** — Successful, efficient end-user adoption is a change leadership challenge, not a technology project. When integrating new technology, focus first on leading people through the transition. Introduce the technology, how the advancements relate to the organization's overall mission and why the change is needed now. Involve those who lead end-users, and be relentless in adhering to common workflow and best-practice usage of the technology.

- **Less is more** — One of the biggest and most common training mistakes is overwhelming learners with content they don't need. Instead, for each end-user role, define the primary tasks to be completed with the new technology and employ learning tools such as scenario-based simulations to make the learning process relevant. Once end-users gain confidence in using the system to perform their primary duties, they will naturally explore and adopt new functions of the technology.

- **Plan for sustainability** — The adoption of new technology requires continuous oversight and leadership to last long term. Considering the high turnover, solutions for end-user adoption must sustain the current work force's know-how while allowing for incremental changes in work flow and technology.

With a well-designed plan in place for measuring and managing work force proficiency, health care organizations can mitigate millions of dollars in reactive training, and enable all employees, even those wary of change, to provide excellent care to patients.

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