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FEDERAL HEALTH FORECAST

4 WAYS TO DRIVE IT INSIGHTS

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IT has the power to drive the health care industry toward quality and cost-efficiency. But too often, existing systems are so outdated and siloed that they can't provide useful insights to the clinicians that need them. At a recent webcast, health IT leaders came together to discuss how organizations can prioritize IT modernization and data management going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology: It's one of those terms that mean many different things to many different people. But in the health care space, it's somewhat of an unsung hero. While clinicians are treating patients, health IT is working in the background to collect information, consolidate data and drive enhanced patient and provider experiences. When done right, health IT can drive the health care industry to prioritize quality and cost-efficiency. Too often, however, these systems are so outdated and siloed, they are unable to provide useful insights to the clinicians that need them.

New technologies and emerging IT trends promise to turn these challenges into opportunities for federal health agencies. But transitioning from "the way things have always been done" to "the way things should be done" isn't always easy.

"The hardest step on the path to standardization and data management is often simply getting started," noted Group Publisher of Federal and Technology Markets at GovExec and Vice President of NextGov James Hanson at a recent webcast, "Optimizing the Value of Healthcare Data."

The event, which was produced by GovExec and hosted by National Government Services, brought together health IT experts from the public and private sector to discuss how the health care industry can prioritize IT modernization and data management going forward. In case you missed it, here are a few takeaways from the discussion.

TIP 1 START BY IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

In the world of health IT, many organizations begin each task by zeroing in on the data in front of them. But this data isn't always accessible or available, because of legacy systems with poor user interfaces, lack of data or system standardization, slowed modernization efforts and the evolving needs of health IT security. What's more, health care staff are suffering from information overload with so much data coming at them from various — and sometimes conflicting — directions.

"There's just so much data that's out there," said Lance Scott, solution integration director at the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization program. "The clinician has only a matter of minutes to see a patient, and they [have] information from hundreds, if not thousands, of data sources that are all coming in at the same time. It's up to us to make sense of that, to give that clinician the ... quickest, most efficient view of exactly what that patient is facing at that time."

Perhaps health IT leaders can help mitigate this information overload by identifying the problem before diving into the data, said Krista Yager, chief digital officer at National Government Services

"Organizations and government often start with the data that's available, but maybe instead [they should] start with a problem or a use case for solving that problem, and then determine what data is needed from there," she explained at the webcast.

This problem-first mentality can empower organizations to more effectively gather insights and mitigate pain points.

"It's really about having a structured process to take any of these new data sources as they're coming in, make sure that the data is captured, it's stored, it's secured and it's ... retained," Yager added.

It's also important for organizations to understand their data and create a roadmap for how they plan to use it.

"From an IT perspective, it's understanding [the] data ... you have [access to] today, that you have access to it, cataloging it, cleansing it, so it ... can be leveraged easily across many different systems and agencies, providing visibility to those data sources ... and then making sure we have [the] tools ... installed so that we can experiment with that data," explained Jane Hite-Syed, chief information officer at National Government Services.

TIP 2 FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Many of the data challenges agencies face today come down to lack of communication among stakeholders.

Scott experienced the importance of communication during his work on the Defense Medical Information Exchange, the Department of Veterans Affairs and Defense Department's joint health record-sharing initiative. From the start, he and his team established relationships with organizations and broke down data sources into categories, which helped IT teams respond to any system interruptions collaboratively — as opposed to in silos.

"I think [this approach] has really paid off huge dividends over the past few years," he explained. "The better your relationships are with all [of] ... those organizations, the better off you'll be."

Of course, achieving that cross-team synergy isn't always easy. In Scott's case, there were a number of cultural differences between VA and DOD.

"It was very much a learning process," he said. "We've made huge strides over the years. I honestly never would have forecasted that it would be as good as it is today."

TIP 3 UNITE THE C-SUITE

While cross-organizational communication is key to driving successful health outcomes, agencies must also ensure a solid line of communication exists internally.

"Success tends to happen when the C-suite entities are communicating with each other," said Nick Marinos, director of information technology and cybersecurity at the Government Accountability Office.

In an ideal world, he explains, a chief information officer would control an entire agency's IT budget. But that's not always the case. Moreover, the CIO must work alongside chief procurement officers, chief human capital officers and chief information security officers to ensure IT teams are supported across the enterprise.

Take a chief privacy officer and a CIO, for example. "If those relationships haven't been established, and the agency heads are not reinforcing the importance of having these communications happen early on in thinking about how the data can be used, then there's a tendency to put privacy and security on the back burner," Marinos said.

He added that at many organizations, these stakeholders only begin communicating in the event of a crisis, like a cyberattack. Establishing a governance model will help ensure internal and external stakeholders are communicating in a way that doesn't deteriorate from the mission, but improves it.

"As we look across the different agencies, we're all trying to solve the same problem and get to the same point, so understand ... the data and the governance that goes with it," Hite-Syed explained.

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> *Director of Information Technology and Cybersecurity at the Government Accountability Office*

TIP 4 FUTURE-PROOF YOUR HEALTH IT OPERATIONS

Over the past several months, health professionals and administrators have witnessed a changing global health landscape. The COVID-19 crisis hasn't only increased the demand for hospital beds and other health services; it has also changed how patients and providers communicate.

"Over the last year, we've seen a massive upswing of telehealth and video visits, which has required [us] to rapidly address these solutions. But this has also posed a cyber challenge," Scott noted. "Very early on, we had to track COVID-19 vaccinations. There [were] some serious cyber vulnerabilities ... that had to be addressed early on."

Yager added that the pandemic has also accelerated the adoption of new and emerging technologies — and her team is exploring how artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotic process automation can help address future health challenges.

But technology alone can't solve all of our problems for us. Addressing the health IT challenges of the future will require a marriage between people and technology.

"The first step in capitalizing in any of these emerging technologies — AI or whatever it might be — is to invest in the right talent, invest in the technology needed to mobilize that talent ... because without the data, without the right people, there's essentially no intelligence to provide the insights to," Yager said.

Find out how National Government Services is helping federal health agencies optimize the value of data.

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