

Preparing for an IT Purchase

Healthcare information technology has become a worldwide, multi-billion-dollar business expected to grow at near double-digit rates for at least the next decade. Hospital executives will have a wide array of technology solutions to choose from that help create efficiencies in patient care and augment bottom lines through enhanced revenue capture.

In this context, the supply chain executive must continually adapt both strategically and financially to the demands and options of an ever-changing landscape. Being prepared to navigate these changes is the first necessary step.

Involve the Right People Involved

To ensure that any new technology is implemented successfully, executives must include end-users in the decision-making process. For clinical systems, nurses, physicians, and other clinicians must be involved. For materials management and financial systems, the accounts payable and purchasing staff must be included. Regardless of the project type, the supply chain executive and the IT department need to be in sync.

An ideal project setup would be to have an end user lead the team, and a member from IT and materials management co-lead. In addition, a senior executive should sponsor the team. Regular meetings and a fully communicated timeline are integral to a project's success, as well as keeping team members motivated.

Assess Existing Changes in Clinical Practices

The next step is to assess existing technology and implementation requirements. There are times when an assessment reveals that an upgrade actually isn't necessary, and team members shouldn't be shy about speaking up if this is the case. However, if a hospital finds that it needs to go forward with the implementation of new technology, special care must be given to redefining existing processes surrounding that new technology and the human component.

An example would be when preference cards are implemented as part of a new operating room

software system. Such technology is designed to make the OR run more efficiently, but it also creates a need for the OR and materials departments to work in sync to ensure that surgical trays are assembled and available at the proper times. The training it takes to address that non-technical part of the change can't be overlooked.

OR nurses must be taught to manage the preference cards and to work with materials management to set up the inventory so a process can be built around managing and using the cards during procedures. There have to be regular meetings of a project implementation team consisting of OR, materials management, and IT staff in the initial phase of the implementation.

Pay Attention to Training and Morale

Additionally, it's best to integrate any new technology brought into a facility in phases to minimize disruption to patients and staff. IT needs to lead the training process, along with the vendor or an outside firm. The time and expense of that training needs to be laid out at the beginning of the entire process.

A specific project team member needs to be appointed to ensure that all of the necessary training components are in place, but that member doesn't need to have high technical skills or technical experience. It's more important to have someone who can manage a project and be a good facilitator among the different departments

and entities involved, as well as someone willing to work around implementation challenges.

Meanwhile, maintaining staff morale throughout the process is vital. Staff members in four key areas—clinical, materials management, IT, and finance—need to understand the new system's modules and functionality. Staff members also must comprehend the anticipated financial net and implications of their choices in order to make sound purchase recommendations. Their verdict will influence financial and strategic decisions to come.

Materials management and finance can play a crucial role in the negotiation process, which should be shared and owned by both departments. Fortunately, with the advancement of web-based systems, it has become easier to install new technology without the typical major hardware costs.

These days, most vendors offer web-based systems for which hospitals pay a monthly fee for a vendor-hosted solution. This option allows a hospital to direct resulting savings to extensive user training, an essential element that can't be over-emphasized to achieve optimal results from any technology tool.

The Executive-Level Perspective

With greater pressure to find savings while increasing efficiencies, the most common type of technology that hospitals should be considering offer help in aligning business processes between clinical, purchasing, and accounts payable. Finding the right solution at the right price is always a difficult task, but the proper planning can ensure the best decisions are made.

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