



How Healthcare IT Can Help Hospitals Become Learning Organizations

The Issue

Becoming a *learning organization*—characterized by continuous knowledge development—has never been more critical for healthcare providers, and the effective use of healthcare IT will play a critical role in helping providers achieve the goal.

Summary of
“Becoming a Learning
Organization: The
Role of Healthcare IT”
by John Glaser and
Marc Overhage, *hfm*,
February 2013.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) has suggested that by becoming learning organizations, providers can support the nation’s efforts to build a healthcare delivery system that learns from and evolves with every patient interaction. The effective use of healthcare IT will guide and support hospitals and health systems in this effort by providing the means for them to capture data and transfer knowledge from every patient interaction—the basis for higher-quality care at reduced cost.

Background

Continuous knowledge development refers to the formation of a closed “learning loop,” in which information generated by clinical research is methodically captured and translated into evidence that is then used as the basis for improving patient care.

Last September, the IOM delivered a challenge to the U.S. healthcare system via a nearly 400-page report, *Best Care at Lower Cost: The Path to Continuously Learning Health Care in America*. In the report, the IOM describes a healthcare system that squanders an estimated \$750 billion a year—roughly 30 cents of every dollar—through unnecessary care, excessive administrative costs, missed prevention opportunities, and other waste, all while failing to deliver reliable care and top-notch outcomes.

Based on its findings, the IOM presented recommendations to improve the nation's healthcare system—including developing ways for hospitals to learn from and evolve with every patient interaction.

Action Steps for Providers

Although advances in IT and data management techniques will enable providers to truly push the envelope in becoming learning organizations, providers must start by ensuring that they have a comprehensive foundation of healthcare IT in place.

For example, providers will require intelligence-based electronic health records (EHRs) that rely upon evolving evidence to help guide diagnostic and therapeutic decisions; inform providers of evidence-based care guidelines; monitor the execution of core clinical processes; and capture, report, and integrate information into quality and performance improvement.

Providers also will require sophisticated business intelligence and analytics to facilitate proactive management of key performance metrics. For example, there will be a greater need to assess care quality and costs, examine variations in practice, and compare outcomes. As such, business intelligence will become the platform upon which an organization not only monitors performance, but also makes critical decisions to uncover new revenue opportunities, reduce costs, reallocate resources, and improve care quality and operational efficiency.

The IOM recommendations also have two major effects on the traditional approach to implementing EHRs.

The intelligent EHR. The need for decision guidance and practice/process support will require that EHRs become more intelligent. Intelligent EHRs will be characterized by sophisticated and flexible rules engines, process monitoring engines, intelligent displays of important patient data, access to knowledge resources, means to collect data from multiple care settings through a health information exchange, and tools that enable provider collaboration.

Knowledge management. This comprises a range of strategies and practices used in an organization to identify, create, represent, distribute, and enable adoption of insights and experiences. While laying the IT foundation for a learning organization environment, providers should carefully consider the tools and technologies available to support knowledge management. For example, what organizational processes will be used to manage the processes of updating and retiring decision guidance?

The EHR's reach should be extended to more effectively engage patients in managing their health, with the personal health record being an important IT capability. Business intelligence capabilities, which are essential in monitoring an organization's performance, should become more embedded in EHRs, supporting real-time assessment of care performance.

For more information, read the full article on this topic: hfma.org/february2013bev1.