Determining the Strategic Direction

Whether in patient care, research, administration, or education, the applications of all types of technologies are exploding in today’s healthcare arena. In patient care, technology is used to admit patients to the hospital, order their tests, perform their tests (e.g., in radiology and laboratory procedures), disseminate the test results, maintain their medical records, provide feedback to the referring physician, follow-up on patients in ambulatory sites, etc. Technology today can suggest treatment modalities in medicine and surgery, thus supporting the quality of medical care. Technology is increasingly integrating the patient into the healthcare decision process. Using technology, patients can explore both the available treatment options and the potential outcomes to help them make more informed treatment choices. In essence, the infrastructure of the modern healthcare world has shifted from bricks and mortar to technology.

The support of research through technology is also growing. Without computers, the mapping of the human genome would never have been undertaken in the first place, let alone achieving completion far ahead of schedule. The mapping of the human genome and the subsequent proteomics research will produce major changes later in the practice of medicine. There will be a time when patients can be “mapped” to determine future disease states and to genetically treat those states before they occur.

In the past, the decision, application, and management of technology resources were issues of organizational debate and discussion. In a surprising number of cases, there was little or no integration or coordination of the informatics strategies with the overall organizational strategies. The informatics strategies—if explicitly defined at all—were set in a kind of organizational vacuum, resulting in considerable suboptimization. Today’s focus is the management of integrated technologies throughout the organization as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. How, then, does an organization determine its strategic technological direction to further that goal?

Establishing a strategic information direction is the process through which the organization allocates its scarce information technology

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resources to achieve outcomes that satisfy the organization’s constituencies. Therefore, the strategic informatics direction can be defined as the allocation of information technology resources (machines, software, personnel, etc.) to enable the organization to achieve its goals.

Why have a strategy? Many organizations have a vague implicit strategy that the leadership typically claims that everyone knows, understands, and completely accepts. Believing this ranks right with belief in the Tooth Fairy. An explicit, carefully crafted, widely communicated strategic informatics plan is essential if the organization expects to hold people accountable for making intelligent, coordinated resource decisions. Different organizations need different informatics strategies. Like people, no two organizations are exactly alike, so no two informatics strategies should be alike in detail. It is critical that the strategic informatics direction incorporates the realities of the particular organization and its overall organizational strategies.

**Strategic Guiding Informatics Principles**

When Alice asked the Cheshire cat for directions, the cat asked her destination. Alice answered that the destination didn’t much matter, and the cat replied that it then wouldn’t make much difference which way she went. Before trying to create detailed plans for an informatics thrust, the organization needs to develop some strategic principles for guiding informatics. While we often jokingly refer to these as “suitable for framing,” they do have a definite purpose. These principles should convey the broad informatics aims against which subsequent, more specific plans can be interpreted, judged, and modified if necessary. These principles can also be useful to those people caught in situations in which decisions become bogged down in politics or territoriality. The following examples of broad guiding principles might be appropriate for many healthcare organizations if they match the organization’s values and overall directional philosophy.

**Example 1**

“The implementation of all technology within our institution must be seamless regardless of the physical location of the information, its perceived ownership, or the organizational structure involved.” This example illustrates a thrust for an organization-wide systems approach as opposed to allowing information fiefdoms to continue or even grow.

**Example 2**

“Our strategic technological decisions must integrate our customers’ needs and the organization’s internal processes and systems to gain a competitive advantage.” This example illustrates the issue of focusing efforts on cus-