THERAP :: Implementation PLAN

`

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

Introduction

The human services industry remains the farthest behind when it comes to its use of technology in many ways. Documentation and files are still primarily maintained on paper, and then often the material is stored in many different locations due to space constraints of given facilities and the strict time periods that states require for such material to be kept on hand. This is not safe, secure, nor is it terribly organized; the sheer volume of client records and related data lends itself to material being misfiled, lost, and accessed by personnel not authorized to do so. A company with the best intentions and developed procedures can still fall victim to these human errors or intentional malicious activity of a staff member reviewing material that should not be available to them (unbeknownst to the administration). Facilities can also burn down, be destroyed in storms, and with the structure goes all of its contents, especially if the contents are paper and contained in flimsy boxes and such. Such a loss could be devastating as this material is critical for an organization to qualify its actions and care for its clients; failure to have this proof can result in numerous citations, loss of funding, and other crippling results that could ultimately result in the closing of facilities.

The documentation itself plays an enormous role in the illustration of the agency's activities with each of its consumers. Accurate and complete material that is lost can never be fully replaced or reconstructed; people's memories of events are clouded, different dimensions of consideration will not be fully realized again—the nursing input, the administrative reviews, the behaviorist's revision of a plan. And what of that completed documentation in and of itself? Can it be verified as to when it was completed and who completed it? Can all those who have reviewed said material be identified unmistakably? An incident report completed on paper may be left in a mailbox and anyone can remove it and access it—regardless of whether they have approval or not. The incident report faxed to another facility is also open to the same unauthorized review. And when was it reviewed? Was it within twenty-four hours or two days later (regardless of the date noted by the reviewer)? No one would ever be able to tell.

These considerations, among others, are what are driving more and more residential and day services providers within the developmental disabilities community to seek better ways in which to maintain their documentation in a secure, HIPAA-compliant way. This material is crucial to an organization's funding and its availability needs to be immediate, unquestionable, and easily verifiable. There is technology that can assist in doing this efficiently by saving time, increasing communication between all levels of staff members—regardless of location—and providing both high levels of security and heightened accountability for all of its personnel. This essay seeks to assist in the implementation of such a system which will force an agency to revise its policies and procedures, confront new challenges, and change many of the ways in which it operates.

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

The transition from a paper-based system to one that is entirely internet-based is an enormous adjustment but, as we will see, it can be well worth it in the end.

Common Concerns

The most immediate concern of non-profit providers, given the funding concerns of late, is certainly cost. In evaluating a system, an agency needs to be certain that there are no hidden costs and that any increases are nominal and will grow within the range of their anticipated funding in the upcoming years. Cost analyses of office supplies and miscellaneous facility costs should help in seeing what is currently being spent in chasing paper. Taking that broad figure and comparing it to the proposed cost of a paperless system should help a bit as one initially begins investigating alternatives.

Anyone who says that the technologically based system will save you money immediately is lying. Unless there are already computers and internet capability readily available in all of the residential and day facilities, there will absolutely be the initial investment in hardware and internet connectivity—whether it is the installation of cable connections or the purchase of wireless routers and laptops for staff who work across the agency's programs. There are a variety of ways in which many agencies address this: donations, seeking the help of organizations such as Tech Soup which helps non-profits get the hardware they need, looking for mass discounts from computer distributors like Dell and Hewlett-Packard which occasionally offer discount packages, and grant-writing for one-time funding. The grant writing option is worth a bit of a discussion, including some common obstacles agencies may face.

The first route that agencies with ideas to improve their services often take is trying to "find a grant". If it were that easy we would all be living the service provider's dream and offering an endless array of supports for people with disabilities. The real-world reality is two-fold: first, it is true that grant resources are indeed abundant, but often the resources are tied to criteria that tend to quickly compromise an organization's eligibility. Secondly (and most challenging) is putting the vision into a crisp and articulate format that convinces the funder to follow the writer from the conceptual phase to the project's final fruition. The latter challenge is where grant seekers frequently have difficulty. Sure, the idea is innovative but when the writer begins attempting to paint the picture within the grant, the vision gets lost in fragmented sentences, pieces of ideas, and many assumptions mistakenly made by the writer (i.e., that the reader knows more than they do).

Successful grant writing, to an extent, is an art form. Part of the process is to paint an articulate picture of the future, should funding be approved. The second component is to convince the reader that funding the concept/project is imperative. To accomplish these two objectives, the writer must spend some time planning the design of the grant. This begins with an understanding of what the funder is looking for and then provided that the

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

funder and the agency seeking grant approval are in sync, the next step is laying the groundwork for how the project will be carried out. Defining a clear problem statement, followed by realistic goals and achievable outcomes, goes a long way toward keeping a potential funder interested in your proposal. Also critical to this process is a realistic budget. Too often grant seekers, especially not-for-profits, undercut the expense of a project in order to get approval. Unfortunately, what frequently happens is that the agency experiences a cash-flow problem as a result of that choice. This under funding results in a struggle to meet the outcomes promised to the funder. Credibility is then lost and the probability of a renewal grant becomes minimal.

As a service provider of technology, Therap is often asked by disability providers about grants that are available to assist in the purchase of our system. There are technology grants available to not-for-profits. Agencies interested in other resources can also seek resources that promote environmental awareness. Unrestricted opportunities also include banks and major corporations that have a policy for corporate giving. Foundations are a great resource if a connection can be found between an agency's board and the members of a foundation's board.

A final thought for agencies seeking grants: make sure to take the time to read the RFP closely and assure that all of the requested information is included. Nothing is worse than having a beautiful presentation rejected because a narrative or a certification was not included. Take the time necessary to do the job right and you will greatly increase the probability of funding.

Once the system is decided upon and the hardware secured, the next phase includes making the transition from paper to an electronic system. With that comes a myriad of challenges including maintaining compliance with state regulations and policy, the training of management and staff, the obvious shifts and changes as people get familiar with their new documentation procedures and the necessary revisions to policies and procedures. All of these are formidable concerns and need to be considered in phases and carefully delegated to make them manageable. Requesting help from the vendor is reasonable as well as there may be other agencies that have already tread the path and are willing to share; networking with others should also be a consideration when taking on the enterprise of streamlining the services you provide.

Aside from the administrative concerns such as policy revision and quality assurance, the staff training tends to cause the most trepidation. Most agencies express apprehension surrounding staff members' computer skills, their willingness to accept change, and internet abuse. The shift from paper-based documentation will require more training for your staff as not only will they need to work with a system that is new to them but they will also be faced with learning basic computer skills. Experience, however, has shown Therap for example, that as internet access becomes more prevalent, that most people have some familiarity—even if it is minimal—with computers, web surfing (i.e., eBay, travel sites, social websites like Facebook), and email. What tends to define an agency's

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

success is its attitude which will filter down to each of its employees: do not underestimate your staff.

One agency recently took the following approach, carefully answering and speaking to each of the concerns offered by those who expressed resistance towards the change. They emphasized the design of the system and how it would improve accountability, prevent time-wasting errors, and focused on how it would ultimately expedite many processes currently in place. When answering to those who complain, "don't fix what isn't broken," listen carefully to their concerns and discuss both the benefits and drawbacks of using a computer-based system and point out that no system will do everything nor meet every need, especially as it is newly implemented. And as with any electronic system, time-saving is crucial as budget constraints grow tighter and people's time more stretched; remind staff members that ultimately the goal is to improve the services for the individuals served. The more time that is saved from simply meeting requirements, the more time that they have to work with their consumers. [1]

An agency that is fearful or negative about change will have a harder time than an agency who embraces the change as improving the services that they provide and hence, the quality of life for the individuals that they serve. When the adoption of electronic record keeping is framed that way, even the most hesitant staff (given that they are invested in that organizational mission) tends to see the change more positively. There is something inherently positive about both increasing people's accountability and professionalism. They feel more valuable and autonomous as their skills are broadened. And they will feel this way if the agency fosters that sense of value as well as offering the support and training required for them to be successful.

So, when considering a system, ensure that it is user friendly as well as offering a varied battery of help, training and support tools that will meet people's diverse needs when it comes to learning. Also make certain that the vendor maintains a positive track record—ask for references to make sure that they will help relieve the burden of training and supporting your staff during the transition and beyond.

The remaining primary concern has to do with the system and the data itself. You need to confirm that the system meets both HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and CMS (Centers for Medicaid/Medicare Services) in regards to security, data integrity and access. Does it record when data is entered? Does it record when forms are reviewed? Does it reveal if information has been altered? Does its logging in process satisfy the requirements of an electronic signature? Can an agency control access for its staff? Can an agency view all staff members' activity in the system? This system should improve your reporting and save you time—ask them how it does that. These are important questions that should be answered.

---

[1] Some of these ideas were offered by Bonnie Scott, Program Manager, from LifeQuest in Mitchell, SD, a Therap User since 2007.

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

It also needs to be reliable. Has it had any unscheduled "downtime" recently? If so, for how long was it unavailable? How is the data stored? How is it replicated? Do they own their equipment or do they subcontract? What happens in the event of a disaster? Who owns the data if the technology company goes out of business? How does an agency access this material in that event? Ask these questions. You know what you need—better than the vendor, better than a consultant—so make sure that you ask everything that you can think of and get satisfactory answers.

We have gone over the most common concerns. Now, how do we alleviate them and make the transition easier?

A Plan

Phase I: Identify the Movers

Choose the individuals within the organization who will drive the transition. These will be the people who run the system, who coordinate the training, who learn the system inside and out. They should have a mixture of computer acumen and programmatic-based knowledge. A typical IT person may be brilliant with hardware and software but have minimal knowledge of how, for example, a group home runs when it comes to developing staff privileges. They may also have no experience in training staff which most human services supervisory figures necessarily have. Both of those skills will be invaluable.

These chosen individuals will also be instrumental in helping rewrite policies surrounding the use of an electronic data-keeping system. Your vendor may also be able to put you in touch with other agencies that are willing to share their revised policies and procedures as guidelines or discuss their challenges and experience with you. This is a valuable resource which will also give the new using agency a "heads-up" on what to expect.

Phase 2: Set up a Timeline

This is imperative. We all tend to do better when we have deadlines. Without deadlines, things are more easily put aside and postponed. Base this timeframe on the size of your agency, the availability of hardware, and any other considerable circumstances, and then sketch out a reasonable timeline to share with the vendor. How expeditious do you want to be? Some agencies want to implement across all facilities at once and do it quickly. This could be the result of new licensing requirements, poor performance during an inspection, or they simply are enthusiastic and hungry for change. Others elect to be more cautious and begin in a few programs at a time; be mindful that this approach requires a firm timeline for all phases of implementation. This can also result in never

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

branching out beyond the initial sites as well as inconsistency for the staff. This approach will work, however, with careful orchestration and diligence.

Phase 3: Pick a Live Date

Once you decide on the technique of implementation that works best for you, select a date when the agency (or chosen facilities) will begin using the system and stop their old documentation. Typically, what organizations will do is on the given date, the paper documentation simply stops with a notation that the information is now stored electronically. The paper documentation is filed away and unnecessary forms are shredded.

Given the variety of documentation needs that most residential and day services programs require, there may be subsequent implementation of further components. These additional components should be delivered the same way: with scheduled training and a planned timeline until the agency has reached full implementation of its new system.

Phase 4: Train Your Staff

The vendor that you are working with most likely offers some type of training. Frequently, depending on their location in relation to your agency's location, that may include web conferencing, printed materials to review, or even on-site training. Communicate your needs with the vendor. Ask for advice to make the training more accessible for the computer-phobic staff or the more resistant personnel. They may have training tools that allow people to work independently of training sessions that are designed for different learning types (i.e., screencast demonstrations, games, overviews, checklists and quizzes). Investigate closely the level of support and the training offered by your chosen vendor as this will be crucial during the implementation and beyond.

Will they come and do some on-site training? This tends to be particularly useful for staff who are fearful of computers or who have minimal experience using one. Will they bring equipment for staff to use? Do they have any ideas around anti-virus software, computer security, or how to prevent internet abuse? Tap into their experience and see what they offer.

For example, there are numerous anti-virus software packages available; McAfee and Norton are among the most well known. Recently, there has also been a lot of praise for Kaspersky Lab's internet security system. Kaspersky will also allow you to try a thirty-day free trial with its full functionality which separates them from others, allowing you to see what it can do. These are great things to play with as you start investigating solutions for all of your hardware.

There is also an endless abundance of free, downloadable shareware that can help with cost. A few examples are listed below.

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

- ***Open Office:*** This shareware functions as Microsoft Office does, offering both word processing and spreadsheet capabilities (among others).
- ***Google:*** They offer through "Google Docs" word processing and spreadsheet capability as well. You can share these documents, as well as calendars, between folks with Google accounts.
- ***Sandboxie.com*:** This application allows you to run your browser "sandboxed" so if something threatening gets downloaded, it never reaches your PC. You can elect to lock it out and therefore, bury it in the sand.
- ***AVG Anti-Virus:*** A well-known free downloadable security package. It has received positive reviews over the past few years with each new release.
- ***Comodo Firewall*:** A firewall to keep intruders at bay and its basic edition is free. *PC World* had many positive remarks regarding this firewall.
- ***Spybot Search and Destroy*:** This software seeks out adware and malware and removes it. Spybot has been around for quite a while and is a well-known application. When you use this, however, it is good to read its instructions beforehand.
- ***Mozilla Firefox:*** An alternative browser to Internet Explorer that has received numerous awards for its security, functionality, and its numerous add-on applications.

The other concern surrounds the abuse of internet access. There are numerous potential solutions to this as well. Thin Client or Neoware that relies on a server to control its level of access can lock down computers to only allow designated internet sites to be accessible. However, with this control be mindful that some portions of functionality may be sacrificed. There is also software that can be installed on each individual computer (i.e., Cybersitter, Cyber Patrol, Pearl Software, for example). And certainly if your agency has an IT department, they can configure other potential options using servers, portals and other clever devices.

It is advisable to have all computers set up exactly the same way with whatever necessary software installed prior to training and implementation. This will allow for consistency among the agency staff members as they learn how to use the new applications. The training for whatever software that you elect to use should come in conjunction with the newly adopted system.

Phase 5: Start!

The most exciting piece is after the training has completed and the date to begin arrives. It helps if you instruct each of the facilities uniformly in what paper documentation will be replaced, as well as reviewing the expectations of each staff member. It is also advisable to ensure that the paper documentation reflects the transition and is then promptly removed and filed away for reference to avoid any confusion for the staff.

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116

As the transition begins, you may consider having weekly meetings with your management staff to ensure that questions or concerns are addressed. Some agencies will hold weekly meetings at different programs to speak with all of the staff and inquire as to their progress. Organizations that tend to succeed are supportive of their staff but firmly resolute in their transition. It is more important than ever to stay in touch with employees and address any relative concerns whether it is resistant or lackadaisical staff members, or difficulty in using the system. Ensure that you are reviewing the documentation that may be newly, immediately available; frequently systems as these will expedite not only communication and processes, but also will illustrate troublesome language in documentation, or reveal a lack of documentation. Problems will come to the forefront for review and attention so be ready.

Phase 6: Follow Up

Recruit your vendor and ensure that they are available for follow-up sessions with you and your colleagues. Request the support that you need. Also, if you do not feel that you are receiving the required (or promised) level of support, let them know. Some providers find that working in smaller refresher sessions to reinforce the initial training is very beneficial. Often these groups will include the direct support staff which will assist in the transmission of information. This will also strengthen their investment in the system, as well as in the agency overall.

As you begin to implement more features of the system, you will repeat the process in much of the same way, but dependent on the design of the system and its ease for users, their acclimation will make the additional components easier to introduce. And again, recruit your vendor to assist with the realization of the entire system. That is their responsibility from beginning to end, and well into the future after implementation.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that we have come to a time where there is constant new technology available for non-profit organizations. With this, come concerns about losing the "human" in human services. However, one cannot be afraid of this technology which can be money-saving, time-saving, and improve an agency's documentation, hence, putting it ahead of its licensing requirements. Those benefits are twofold: improved services could result in more RFPs, better funding, as well as the ultimate benefit: supplying your staff with the tools to do their job efficiently. That's the urgency behind the mere consideration of adoption of an electronic system: providing the highest level of care to your consumers.

562 Watertown Avenue, Suite 3
Waterbury, CT 06708-2240, USA
Phone: 1-203-596-7553, Fax: 1-203-757-5116