

Feature Story | HIM and IT: Working Better Together

By: Tricia Truscott, MBA, RHIA, CHP

Introduction

Creating strong internal teams is a health information management department's best vehicle for success. This is particularly true when working with information technology (IT) departments. For health information management (HIM), the key to all successful partnerships is communication. Specifically, communication should be:

- Two way
- Well-detailed
- Respectful
- Trusting

Similar to the Tower of Babel, hospital and clinic departments often speak their own language with specific terminology, jargon, and alphabetic codes - especially in HIM and IT. By realizing that the Tower of Babel exists, both departments take a crucial step towards improving relationships and fostering stronger teams. Based on my experience, learning to speak each other's language is the first step to working better together. But it doesn't stop there!

HIM's Top Ten for Better IT Relationships

I'm often asked how my organizations, The Carle Foundation Hospital and Carle Clinic Association, Urbana, Illinois, have been so successful with our technology projects. Recently, I listed out my tips for successful IT partnerships. As part of Health Information and Technology Week 2006, I'm sharing them with you. Tip #10: Understand

Understand that IT does not speak the same language as HIM. They don't understand our processes and operations.

Tip #9: Share the Details

To help them learn our language, diagram out your departmental workflow in great detail and show every step in your processes. Explain your diagrams and processes over lunch-and-learn or other department functions. When others don't understand what HIM departments do, they tend to make assumptions and fill in the blanks.

Tip #8: Respect their Expertise

IT also has specific language, terminology, alphabetic codes, and expertise. Ask them to teach you how to communicate in IT language. And if you don't understand, keep asking until you do!

Tip #7: Get to Know Them

Learn about the various roles within the IT department and understand their workflows. Just as HIM has specific roles like analysts, coders and transcriptionists, IT has specialists. Integration, interface, network, and telecom specialists all have the right skills for the right job.

Tip #6: Inclusion

Include IT in your future plans early and often. Whether for a move, a new technology, or any other project, upfront planning and inclusion is key. By involving both departments early in the process, the success rate of projects increases while the need for work "do-overs" is minimized.

Tip #5: Trust and Respect

When working on a joint project, develop a relationship of trust and respect for each other. Verify answers (on both sides) and monitor every step along the way.

Tip #4: All Levels

Relationship between HIM and IT should occur at all levels of both departments. Regular management-level meetings to deal with planning, schedules, objectives, go-lives, status reports, etc. are essential.

Tip #3: Expectations

Set mutual expectations realistically. This includes expectations with your staff, IT staff, end users, and vendors. IT can help HIM separate vendor promises from technology reality. My IT department has often served as my best antidote for vendor over-sell!

Tip #2: IT Has Priorities Too

Realize IT takes on a lot of work from every department, every day. Their resources can get tapped out and they need to prioritize projects. They may need to hire extra help or employ consultants. Just like HIM, IT has a budget and constraints. Realize that their priorities may be dictated by executive management decisions, so don't take it personally when you hear "no."

Tip #1: It Takes a Team

Finally, the most important step in working better together is realizing that you can't do it alone. HIM and IT relationships improve when both departments recognize and respect the contributions of the other.

NOTE:

Tricia has worked as the director of Health Information Management at The Carle Foundation Hospital and Carle Clinic Association since 1998. By using these communication skills, she has developed a very successful partnership with the organization's IT department. Not only at the director level but throughout Carle's entire HIM staff. We congratulate her success during Health Information and Technology Week 2006!