

The Fear Factor

Will you guide, lead or be dragged into a new era of technological innovation?

BY STEVE MAYFIELD



This year will bring many new ideas and changes to health care, so the 2010 Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society annual conference's theme of "Change is everywhere ... opportunity is here," isn't far from the truth. But what types of opportunities can we seize from the changes?

Hospital CEOs are well versed in employee resistance to change and how it can kill any type of project, especially if IT is a major component. The positive impact of specific technologies on quality of care or the ability to streamline administrative processes has been highlighted ad nauseam. Yet, hospitals are often slow to adopt new technologies and employees frequently create workarounds when they do, resulting in costly failures.

Perhaps this resistance isn't to the change itself, but to a lack of understanding of the role technology plays in everyday life. From electricity to smart phones, everyone is comfortable with some level of technology. The trick is to incorporate the technology into daily life so that it becomes easier to use these new tools than to do things the old way.

Basic technologies—lights, television, air-conditioning—are part of everyday life. They provide comfort and are easy to use. Likewise, searching the Internet is faster and more efficient than looking up items in the Yellow Pages. However, there is a fear factor to using the Internet and not everyone is comfortable with it. Once people are shown how new technologies can improve their lives, most are amenable to incorporating it into daily life—which is why Internet use has grown exponentially in recent years.

What all these technologies have in common is that they either made tasks easier to accomplish or improved the quality of life. They all involved process changes that people were willing to accept. It's much easier to flip a light switch than carry a candle around, making sure you have a match to relight it and being vigilant to not burn the house down. Yet President Benjamin Harrison was so afraid of flipping a light switch he would have White House staff do it for him. Eventually, light switches were universally accepted because of the ease of use and improvement to the quality of life.

That type of ubiquitous acceptance could be the case with electronic medical records and other health technologies. No one is arguing about whether the technologies are effective; that's been proven. It's now time to move to the next level: acceptance of the process changes these technologies will drive into the very way health care is delivered. Make no mistake, these technologies will trigger unprecedented changes to care delivery in this country. The question becomes: Are health care leaders ready to direct and guide (some might say drag) the rest of the industry with them on this road of extraordinary opportunity?

Change brings opportunity to excel. Through Hospitals in Pursuit of Excellence, the American Hospital Association is highlighting many innovative improvement projects that focus not only on managing change, but taking it to the next level by improving care and efficiency. Check out www.hpoe.org and become inspired to change your organization. ●



Steve Mayfield is senior vice president of quality and performance improvement at the American Hospital Association.

You can contact our guest author at smayfield@aha.org

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