Overcoming EHR Implementation Hurdles to Achieve Organizational Success

BACKGROUND

A regional, 300-bed hospital implemented an EHR system with the expectation that it would improve efficiencies and lower costs while complying with federal Meaningful Use requirements. But the implementation was done without sufficient vendor support or advanced project management techniques, and as a result the hospital did not achieve its intended objectives. Warbird Consulting Partners was brought in to 1), address the problems related to the implementation and 2), establish project-management methodologies while documenting processes to ensure more seamless systems implementations in the future.

CHALLENGE

After engaging with this hospital and reviewing their EHR implementation process, we identified a number of serious issues and concerns:

- Certain members of the executive team had fast-tracked the EHR vendor of their choice through the RFP process. The decision to proceed with the vendor was not subject to any steering-committee governance or oversight. Furthermore, at the time of the decision it was not completely clear that the selected system would actually meet the hospital's clinical and financial needs.
- The hospital had no experience in working with this vendor or any of its applications.
- No project plan for implementation existed. Moreover, no full-time project managers were assigned to the implementation from the hospital's resource pool, forcing staff to schedule implementation procedures around their other work. Essentially, the hospital used virtual project managers to implement a new product while trying to support the legacy system.
- The hospital depended on the EHR vendor to provide a system completely customized to the hospital's workflow requirements. However, the vendor only knew how to implement the system as it was designed out of the box, and consequently was not able to provide the level of customization the hospital was seeking.
- The hospital and the vendor each thought it was the other's responsibility to support, customize and maintain the system, creating a tense situation in which neither side was taking ownership or control. End users quickly began to lose faith in the new system.
- Lacking a project methodology, and without sufficient internal staff to manage the implementation project, little attempt was made to determine if the vendor's system was functioning as the implementation reached key milestones. As a result, no timely feedback was provided to the vendor regarding required fixes or the overall functioning of the system.

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In short, the hospital had selected an EHR system with which it was totally unfamiliar and then failed to allocate the internal resources necessary to make the implementation a success. Though more than a year had passed since implementing the system, the hospital was still not adequately

supporting it. Many applications remained dysfunctional, resulting in a significant and ongoing negative impact on the hospital's clinical and financial operations.

SOLUTION

Warbird Consulting Partners recognized that the hospital urgently needed project managers with deep business and clinical expertise on site to oversee and resolve the various issues stemming from a sub-optimal EHR implementation. Besides these managers, Warbird engaged a senior project manager with 15 years of experience at the hospital's EHR vendor itself. This gave the team critical insights on how to work with the vendor and get the necessary support.

RESULTS

With a group of dedicated managers on board, Warbird was able to help the hospital optimize its EHR system and demonstrate a measurable ROI. In particular, Warbird established procedures for change management, project management and governance, the results of which included:

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Optimized workflow. Familiar with the EHR vendor's technology, Warbird's senior manager could offer appropriate process-related "workarounds" if the vendor stated that a particular functionality was nonexistent or wouldn't be available until a future upgrade.

Ensured more responsive vendor support. Similarly, the Warbird senior manager knew how to reach the right people at the right time within the vendor organization. This ensured that messages and help tickets were addressed promptly and effectively.

Initiated issue prioritization. Warbird helped prioritize technical issues when contacting the vendor for support so that the most urgent issues were dealt with first. Moreover, Warbird began checking and validating the vendor's own schedule of technical fixes and updates to better plan for these improvements.

Implemented invoice "scrubbing." The hospital had always assumed that invoices from the vendor were correct. But by checking invoice details, Warbird realized that the hospital was being charged maintenance fees—sometimes totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars over several years—for products that were not even being used. Eliminating these expenses resulted in significant savings both retroactively and going forward. (This is an example of Warbird's belief that IT should always be viewed through a financial lens in order to gain a demonstrable ROI.)

Improved prioritization of customization requests. Prior to Warbird's involvement, almost anyone at the hospital could make a customization request for extra support from the vendor, often at a significant and uncontrolled cost. We changed the policy so that customization requests require a manager or executive's approval and ensured that the cost was accounted for within the appropriate cost center. Now the hospital

has a much clearer picture of how each department is managing customization requests and the associated costs.

Reduced expenses. With no real oversight on expenses, the hospital was paying thousands of dollars a month for external trainers and their related travel costs. Warbird showed the hospital how identifying and upgrading internal training resources could reduce expenses by mitigating the need for external trainers.

Increased awareness of accountability. Warbird helped educate hospital staff on what the hospital is responsible for, and on what vendors should deliver, when implementing new technologies. In contrast to the initial EHR implementation, in which the hospital left the entire process in the vendor's hands, hospital management now knows that focusing on training and operations on the hospital side results in a better implementation experience and, subsequently, a more-optimized use of the new system.

Ensured projects were on time and within budget. Prior to the Warbird engagement, projects were rarely completed on time and within budget. As part of Warbird's emphasis on change and detailed project management, as well as IT governance, Warbird helped the hospital establish a comprehensive methodology to keep projects on track. This approach includes a communication model to ensure that executive sponsors and project champions are always aware of the rationale for a given project, the estimated and actual costs, and the benefits to be received.

CONCLUSION

At the root of the hospital's EHR implementation issues was the lack of effective project and vendor management. By establishing a set of project management methodologies, Warbird Consulting Partners helped hospital leaders resolve the operational and technical challenges with this implementation while empowering them to manage future implementations entirely on their own.

More fundamentally, Warbird led an important cultural change within the organization. Hospital leadership now embraces the need for overall IT governance, detailed project planning, financial focus, change strategies and, of course, advanced project and vendor management.

In addition, executives now realize that a successful IT implementation involves the entire organization. The new communication model ensures that all employees are engaged in the implementation process and understand that their contributions are essential to its success.

As a result, with new tools and a new mindset, the hospital can now approach future implementations with confidence.

ABOUT WARBIRD CONSULTING PARTNERS

Warbird Consulting Partners is a professional services firm that offers customized, value-driven accounting and financial solutions combined with highly-experienced resources. We support clients who have project needs, including interim staffing and recruiting needs which demand special attention, rapid response and scalable services. Warbird resolves our clients' most complex business challenges by delivering measurable and sustainable results. Warbird's practices include Healthcare, Accounting Advisory, Government and Mortgage Solutions. To learn more about how we help healthcare organizations achieve optimal performance, contact **P.J. deRijke** at pderijke@warbirdcp.com or directly by phone at 404-408-0309. Visit www.warbirdconsulting.com.