

MAXIMIZING PATIENT FLOW TECHNOLOGIES: Eight Keys to Success

Every organization wants to create optimal patient flow, and technology is an essential tool for achieving improved performance. But, as evidenced by our experience with many clients, technology not used to its full potential will limit an organization's ability to reach patient flow performance goals. Below are eight keys to maximizing patient flow technologies, and meeting patient flow goals.

1. Assess existing patient flow processes before implementing a new technology.

It is essential to determine whether work flow is supporting organizational priorities and goals for patient flow before implementing a new technology. Otherwise, technology implementation runs the risk of automating an inefficient process. Organizations need to ensure that the needs and goals of all stakeholders – including patients, caregivers, physicians, nurses and community resources – are understood, and that the process is redesigned with both the stakeholders and desired outcomes in mind before technology is applied.

2. Evaluate technology before implementation to make sure it will not hinder patient flow.

If not evaluated carefully, technology meant to optimize patient flow can instead slow it down. One organization made the decision to increase the amount of clinical documentation they stored electronically. The new electronic documentation process did meet some important goals, such as facilitating easier access to patient information, reducing the occurrence of “lost” components of the chart and reducing paper use. However, the new process also had an unintended consequence. Because it required more of their time, physicians began waiting until later in the day to complete a patient's chart. The result was patients waiting longer for discharge, which created significant overall slowdowns in patient flow. As a result of the negative outcome, the organization had to undertake a redesign of the documentation technology in order to create a more streamlined process.

3. Configure technology to support patient flow, ensuring start-to-finish planning.

Patient flow activities are inherently interconnected and must be treated as such. Each change has an effect on the entire process. Patient flow technologies must support:

- **Front-end work:** placing the patient in the right unit upon admission
- **Discharge planning:** facilitating the entire care team in proactive preparation for discharge; and
- **Patient transition:** making sure the patient is discharged to the next level of care safely and in a timely manner.

Often organizations make investments in the technologies needed for success, but they do not optimize and link the tools to enable the best work processes and patient flow possible.

4. Create an environment of trust: stakeholders must trust the process, the technology, and each other to create optimal patient flow.

If stakeholders don't trust the supporting technology and the data it contains, work-arounds that hinder flow are almost inevitable. At one organization, the environmental services department was receiving so many stat bed clean requests they had no way to prioritize their work. Smoothing the work flow process by appropriately aligning resources to the demand and establishing turnaround time targets created significantly fewer “emergencies” and built trust back into the system. The staff knew that when a request was made for a bed to be cleaned that there would be a timely, reliable response. As a result, the number of total stat requests decreased from 40% to 4%. When properly implemented, the technology became a critical component in supporting an effective process for readying beds for incoming patients.

5. Standardize communications and expectations across disciplines.

Stakeholders across disciplines (nurses, physicians, surgeons, anesthesiologists, support staff) must all be on the same page, working with clear terminology and common goals, for flow to be maximized. At one facility, after a pre-surgical checklist process failed to ensure patients were prepped for surgery on-time, staff realized that stakeholders were not in synch on what constituted a patient's readiness for surgery. Once stakeholders collaborated and agreed on terms, process and expectations, they were able to implement a successful, technology-supported "countdown to surgery" sequence that greatly improved flow.

6. Use advanced features of patient flow technologies.

Many organizations marginalize their technology by not using its advanced features. At one organization, the nursing staff moved from using verbal requests for housekeeping and transportation staff services to using electronic notifications, creating considerable improvement in bed turnaround and discharge times. But they were able to become even more efficient after enabling the "escalation page" function of their technology. This function was used to send automated pages to supervisors if housekeeping or transportation staff did not respond to a request after a set time period, so that any issues could be resolved. The pages had a direct, positive and immediate impact on bed turnaround time, created a way to promote timely communication and resolution, and ultimately, took performance from solid to excellent.

7. Ensure that appropriate resources and processes are in place to manage and maintain new technologies.

Organizations must determine what roles and resources are necessary to maximize technology after its installation. For example to maximize the use of a bed board, it is important to create a patient

placement department to ensure each stakeholder is entering and using information collected on the bed board properly, in a timely manner, and with organizational priorities in mind. In addition, supporting technologies must be consistently monitored to ensure that workarounds or customizations are put into the system only after thoughtful and hospital-wide consideration. New users must also be properly trained and the hardware maintained. Strong vendor support can be a means to ensuring that user training, maintenance, upgrades, and customizations are all completed in a manner that keeps the process and technology running at high quality.

8. Use patient flow technology to help teams focus on common goals.

Because patient flow affects many departments and disciplines, it requires collaboration to create optimal outcomes. When teams come together regularly to review standard metrics reported through patient flow technologies, they can focus on specific areas for improvement, as well as connect performance to the overall mission and vision of the institution. For example, an organization that meets weekly to review key patient flow metrics might see that they are meeting their goal for inpatient placement time into a bed, but are not meeting their goal for placing patients on a unit that matches the primary placement for diagnosis. By using a single dashboard to highlight these key measures, a multi-disciplinary discussion can occur among stakeholders who can collectively decide if action should be taken to change course, or if the current outcomes are satisfactory.

By acknowledging that technology and work flow must both be optimized, organizations can achieve their ambitious patient flow performance goals while also improving staff satisfaction, patient satisfaction, and patient care – the highest goal of any health care team.

ABOUT STOCKAMP

Stockamp, a Huron Consulting Group Practice, is a leading national provider of performance improvement solutions for hospitals and health systems. Since 1990, Stockamp has helped high-performing hospitals reach the pinnacle of financial and operational excellence, and generate billions of dollars of benefits as well as significant patient service and employee satisfaction improvements.

For more information on Stockamp's Patient Flow Solutions contact Ken Saitow, ksaitow@huronconsultinggroup.com or visit our website at www.huronconsultinggroup.com,