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Healthcare IT Projects – Issues and Opportunities

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Introduction

The vibrant and dynamic healthcare market of contemporary times continues to thrive in an environment of severe cut-throat competition and enormous uncertainties. On the one hand is the opportunity to cash in on the tremendous growth opportunities, while on the other hand there is intense pressure to survive against young, lean and innovative players. Acknowledging this reality, majority of the market players have undergone a dramatic transformation in their attitudes. Be it the hospitals, pathology laboratories, diagnostic imaging centres and for that matter even pharmacy outlets, today all are strategizing to be different from others and dream of being market leaders. And in order to be able to realize this explicit objective they have started looking at healthcare IT solutions as a critical differentiator.

This paradigm shift has significantly paved a way for increased percolation and utilization of healthcare IT products and solutions in healthcare delivery. There is a clear and unanimous understanding among all the stakeholders about the benefits of information technology in improving the operational efficiency, quality of patient care and image branding.

Thus, in the recent times healthcare IT is undergoing serious boost in its acceptance. However while acceptance signals a triumph; the flip side is that the very decision of deploying IT solutions by healthcare delivery providers exposes a raw wound and thus reveals issues and challenges associated.

If we categorically target the hospital sector, as a general observation, most of the hospitals venture in the adoption of IT solutions keeping in minds the above mentioned benefits. Once decided the process encompasses a whole gamut of activities which ranges from vendor selection to software implementation.

Issues

Vendor selection is not the end

For most of the hospitals, a myth prevails that selection of a big IT company is synonymous to a robust system and a successful implementation. Hence, a significant amount of time and energy is devoted in selecting an IT vendor. In fact, majority of the hospitals managements believe that once the budget is allocated and vendor selection is done, their role and responsibility for the remainder of the project becomes passive and is limited only to providing data, infrastructure and some resource.

However, in my opinion it is this mindset which is responsible for most of the failures in software implementations in healthcare. Indeed vendor selection constitutes a critical step but hospitals should look at the project beyond it and with a broader spectrum.

Select solution partners, not vendors

The second biggest issue is that hospitals in general select vendors as against solution partners. There could be a non-exhaustive list of vendors in the healthcare IT market but what hospitals should look for is a solution partners and not a vendor.

Generally it is found that vendors come with a technical perspective and thus a very confined knowledge of healthcare domain. This limits them from addressing many such issues which are crucial from the hospital management's perspective

On the contrary a solution provider with its rich and varied knowledge of the domain appears more promising and provides both the IT solution as well as the required expertise of the field.

Focus on project management approach

Another issue is the practice of neglecting the important role of project management.

Project management approach holds the key to sustained success for any software implementation. Hospitals should prioritize this concept, both while constituting the in-house plan and also while evaluating the solution partner's charter. Similarly, adequate attention should be paid while forming and evaluating the project team of both the sides.

Emphasize on people management approach

Yet another issue, which needs to be tackled is people management.

It is a universally accepted fact that success of a software project is highly people dependent. Therefore, in case of healthcare projects, like all other parameters, equal and strong emphasis should be laid on people management as well. It becomes highly imperative for project heads of both sides to keep the team morale significantly high throughout the project. Project delays and apathy at management levels could lead to people disillusionment, which in turn may lead to attrition and thus affect the project outcomes.

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Opportunities

As discussed above, healthcare IT projects involve a galaxy of management techniques and skills. These projects also offer a tremendous learning opportunity to all stakeholders involved.

Opportunities to the healthcare providers

Healthcare providers of any group are the biggest beneficiaries of the IT solutions. They not only get the direct advantages of automation, which the systems offer, but gain much more from other opportunities during the process of IT solutions deployment. Some of such interlaced opportunities include:

- **Business Process Engineering (BPR):** Majority of implementations today involves some kind of re-engineering in the existing processes and work flows. By undergoing such changes and improvements, healthcare systems adopt the standard best practices and thus improve their operational efficiency.
- **Accreditations:** With quality the dictum in today's times, implementation of IT solutions provide an opportunity to healthcare providers in getting their information systems and operations aligned with the standard requirements set for accreditation.
- Similarly there exist many such hidden opportunities, which can be explored and exploited in the best interest of the organisations.

Opportunities to solution partners

Healthcare IT projects often become a demanding proposition on the solution partners. The difficulties and challenges that accompany any new project can be taken as opportunities of continuous improvement. Invariably projects of any size can be taken as a canvas to improve and grow on:

- New improved processes
- Innovative use of technology
- Expectation management skills
- Change management skills
- Time and resource management skills
- Risk management skills

Conclusion

At 21st century health management solutions, we address the problems of 21st century healthcare with a unique blend of innovation and expertise of domain and technology. With solutions catering to a vast market segment and implementations done using professional and knowledge-based project management skills, we catalyse the healthcare delivery systems. With a strong core team of subject matter experts, it is a very exciting place to work with highly passionate fellow experts as healthcare IT solution partners to some of the leading healthcare providers in India and abroad. ■