Federal Health Interoperability:
5 Building Blocks

Interoperability: it's a topic that's top-of-mind for today's Federal health executives. And it's no surprise—when done right, interoperability in the health information ecosystem means greater safety and better outcomes for patients, along with a boost in efficiency and serious cost savings all around.

But if Federal health interoperability is the finish line, where should health IT leaders get started? And what building blocks should serve as the foundation for your interoperability conversations, both with your internal team and with external partners? Great questions. For answers, let's take a closer look at five distinct elements that you'll want to consider when developing your own federal health interoperability project.

Standardization

To maximize your data's value and ability to be used across agencies and platforms, it's imperative that you keep electronic health record (EHR) and health information exchange (HIE) data consistent and standardized. Any deviation from the standard carries the possibility of rendering the data useless in any system other than your own, so uniformity is essential.

Standardization counts too when it comes to implementation; stakeholders must agree, upfront, to implementation standards if you are to ensure a base level of delivery for customers. If one partner doesn't have the technology, the funding or the will to meet the base standard, the time to find that out is before the project kicks off rather than once agreements have been signed and resources have already been extended.

Not certain the best way to standardize data across data sets? Check out the DATA Act first. The Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (or DATA Act)[1] of 2014 established government-wide data standards for reportable spending information and has since been updated with guidance on handling personally identifiable information. Other Data Coalition[2] acts, including the Open Government Data Act[3], may provide additional best practices on standardization.

Clear Governance

Another building block of Federal health IT interoperability is that of governance; essentially, who is responsible for (and has access to) what resources and when? Agreement on these roles and the rules of engagement upfront is imperative to the success of your shared project. The time to determine how you will overcome challenges and work out any issues in the shared decision-making process is before the process begins, not in the middle of the situation, so ensure that you, your internal stakeholders and your partner agencies are on the same page.

Do you have a specific interoperability challenge that's keeping you awake at night?

Are you encountering more stumbling blocks than building blocks?

Get in touch with us today to learn more about how we can help you overcome your interoperability challenges by visiting:

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[1] https://www.datacoalition.org/issues/data-act/
[2] https://www.datacoalition.org/about/
[3] https://www.datacoalition.org/open-government-data-act/

Security/privacy

With ransomware attacks against municipalities making headlines[4] and data breaches wreaking havoc on a regular basis[5], it's understandable that data security and privacy are primary concerns for both Federal health executives and consumers. And exchanging data across agencies brings its own challenges that must be resolved.

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology[6] (ONC) has developed specific guidelines related to achieving interoperability in an ecosystem where individuals are at the center of their care and providers have access to a big-picture view of their health, courtesy of a single, secure EHR drawn from disparate sources. Check out ONC's Interoperability Standards Advisory[7] for more information.

Technological Viability

Think about your technology stack and the platforms and tools you use on a regular basis. Could your current software handle your new interoperability tasks? If not, how difficult would it be for your organization to switch to something completely new? And what impact would that change have on other areas of your organization?

Before moving forward on a joint project, each partner and stakeholder must honestly assess your current technology's infrastructure and capabilities. Along those lines, you must also assess your organization's ability and willingness to adopt and adapt to new technology. Your interoperability success will be largely dependent on how committed you are to making changes that will facilitate interoperability and smooth information exchange.

Mutual Goals, Values and Trust

The most successful interoperability projects are those that not only have a strong technology foundation, but a strong organizational foundation as well—and at the core of that relationship is a sense of mutual understanding and trust between the stakeholders involved. The reality is that in projects of this scope, mistakes will be made and things will be overlooked. Knowing that your partners and stakeholders are just as committed as you are will help you keep everything in perspective rather than allowing it to throw you off track.

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[4] https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/10/politics/ransomware-attacks-us-cities/index.html
[5] https://www.wired.com/story/biggest-cybersecurity-crises-2019-so-far/
[6] https://dashboard.healthit.gov/index.php
[7] https://www.healthit.gov/isa/