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Reality check: managed IT services a boon to Canadian hospitals



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Across the country, legacy hospital information systems (HIS) are in dire need of replacement or significant upgrades. The harsh reality is that budget constraints mean healthcare organizations can no longer afford to run their own medical grade information technology (IT) solutions. This is compounded by a skills gap – designing, implementing and managing complex health IT systems is not a hospital's core strength or focus.

There is no choice but to find a way to update these essential systems that coordinate and regulate information throughout a hospital. Healthcare professionals rely on them 24/7 to view charts, order lab tests, perform patient intake and discharge, and keep operations running efficiently.

Beyond 'DIY' Health IT

As the sun sets on DIY health IT, several new, more modern and cost effective ways to manage hospital systems are emerging. From 'rip and replace' to managed services to cloud-based approaches, private sector vendors are emerging as game-changing partners in delivering and maintaining health IT systems.

While this is common practice in many other industry sectors (think banking and airlines), outsourcing information infrastructure to expert private sector vendors is not a slam-dunk for Canadian health organizations. In fact, it remains to be seen if Canadian hospitals will accept a private sector organization to manage their applications for a clinical solution, as have their US counterparts.

Critics point to the private sector's 'for-profit' motives, potential for privacy and security breaches, and ability to take on the required level of accountability as proof-positive that a managed service approach will take public-sector healthcare down a risk-fraught path.

The problem with these perceptions is that delivering sustainable healthcare is not a zero-sum game. Patients, health professionals, healthcare budgets and private sector experts can all 'win', despite their varied perspectives, when they engage in new ways.

Reality check:

1 'For-profit' is not a four-letter word. Furthermore, private sector involvement in managed technology does not mean privatized healthcare delivery. The motive is not profit at any cost; it's enabling a new standard of safe, quality and efficient care, while also maintaining a profitable business that enables ongoing investment in new technologies that will improve healthcare delivery for all Canadians for generations to come.

2 Privacy and security breaches are going to happen.

This is a very real issue anytime data is stored, shared and processed, whether in a healthcare context or otherwise. What matters is how privacy is designed into a system, how quickly it is mitigated and the level of transparency in reporting, escalating and fixing problems when they arise. According to respected privacy expert Ann Cavoukian, who heads Ryerson University's Privacy and Big Data Institute, TELUS has a leg up¹ when it comes to managing personal data and privacy, crunching billions of bits of customer and network data in a way that respects and protects customer privacy.

3 Being accountable is in vendors' DNA. Vendors that eschew accountability pay a high price from a reputational and financial standpoint. Yes, it is essential that health organizations have clarity on what accountabilities they require of a vendor and conduct due diligence to ensure the bar will be met (or exceeded). However health IT should really be about long-term relationships that are less "tick-the-box" contracts and more strategic partnership where vendors are not hesitant to take on risk and clients are able to freely iterate as their needs evolve.

When health organizations become more open to broader partnering with vendors, they will benefit from world-leading solutions at a price they can afford on an ongoing basis. And there is precedent.

Niagara Health, Royal Ottawa Hospital, eHealth Ontario, and Alberta Health Services are all veterans of TELUS managed services to provide wireless connectivity in their care environments. Similarly, the government of British Columbia and Alberta Health Services use TELUS managed services to process payroll and related human capital services. It begs the question, if managed services are good enough for administrative systems, then why not extend this to hospital IT systems?



¹ IT World Canada, June 2, 2015