Pharmacy Automation and Technology

Consider Adopting Collaborative Project Management Software

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Pharmacy administrators are often tasked with a range of responsibilities, from strategic planning and human resources to information systems management. Because of this, tools to support administrators' efficient and appropriate attention to everything on their plate can be valuable. Identification and evaluation of the available tools should be guided by careful consideration of the department's needs.

Many of us are likely familiar with the movie that brought us the line, “Life is like a box of chocolates.” Those in pharmacy management and leadership positions, or those who have these positions in their eventual goal set, may very well feel that the statement is an accurate characterization of their daily professional responsibilities. You never know what surprises the day will hold. There are unexpected events related to personnel, administrative, systems, and a variety of other issues that need immediate attention. However, pharmacy leaders often face challenges that are less urgent and are more about implementing, modifying, and improving existing systems. In this context, *systems* are people, processes, resources, and tools working together to achieve a common goal. These challenges often do not demand an immediate resolution, but instead need a systematic, coordinated approach to achieve a desired outcome. We believe these challenges can be approached as a *project*, which is commonly defined as a temporary sequence of interconnected activities having a singular goal that must be completed under time and budgetary constraints and to defined specifications.

There are opportunities for advanced project management training. However, this training is not necessary to develop an appreciation for the role of project management in professional – and even personal – activities. Thinking about the constraints of time, budget, and specification, what technology-related tasks are you currently managing that have

these parameters? Implementing or upgrading your pharmacy management system, improving computerized prescriber order entry, or maximizing electronic health record benefits? Certainly among these tasks, coordination, communication, and documentation are needed to meet the prescribed time frames, budgets, and desired specifications. The complexity of your organization and the projects you are working on influence whether informal or formal project management training is needed. Regardless of your chosen route, we have found that use of a common software platform among key players can greatly enhance project success.

The following features of software intended to support project management activities can be utilized to ensure maximum efficiency and effectiveness in your department. Before diving into the features, it is important to acknowledge that spreadsheet software has commonly been used to document tasks, responsible parties, and due dates to manage projects. In our experience, the use of spreadsheets is valuable when initially laying out tasks, assigning responsible parties, and defining timelines. However, the complexity and continually evolving nature of projects, especially those that are technology-related, dictates the use of a more powerful tool. Some of the features we suggest that you look for include the ability to (1) share a single point of collaboration among multiple users, (2) create linkages between tasks that indicate the relationships between tasks, (3) provide real-time documentation across all users, (4) collaborate on

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external documents, (5) document time spent, (6) allow function on smartphones/tablets, and (7) facilitate videoconference with other users. Price is an important consideration as well.

Because of the current focus in health care toward the use of interdisciplinary (or multidisciplinary) teams to drive and complete projects, we place special emphasis on features that allow multiple users to collaborate in a single, shared space even when they are in disparate locations. Team members should be able to comment on or edit a task, link external files and URLs to a task, add and delete tasks, review previously completed tasks, and a host of other activities critical to seeing a project through to completion. All of these activities should be able to be viewed by all interested individuals at any time. The project manager needs to be able to control who accesses the project documentation tool, providing greater access to some individuals while narrowing the access privileges of others.

An additional layer of complexity is introduced by the mobile nature of these teams; this increases the importance of project management software that supports a variety of computing platforms. Tablets and smartphones are clearly the preferred mobile computing devices for today's health care professionals. A project that relies on project management software primarily for management of tasks will have different software requirements than a project in which project management software is the central hub for all communication, documentation, and reporting on a project's activities. The challenge is to find a project management software tool that adequately balances requisite functional requirements while also supporting the types of computing platforms that project personnel use.

Project participants – especially those on the go – should be able to receive automated notifications

when action is taken in the project management software tool. A communication thread is useful to create a narrative that allows individuals to read the sequence of events that led to the project's current state. One way to achieve this is through the use of a common email address that is included on all project-related email correspondence. Email messages will then auto-populate the documentation portion of the project management software. Similarly, project directors need individual as well as group messaging capabilities to allow them to update appropriate project participants.

There is a broad array of project management software. Many common features are found across most tools. Distinguishing features include the number of users allowed on a project in free versions, number of projects supported on free versions, overall fee structure for fee-based tools, extent of functionality on mobile versions, integration with external tools like Dropbox, and the user interface. We can't overstate the importance of the last feature in the selection process. As project teams grow and projects extend from weeks to months and even years, it is critical to have a tool that project team members find both easy to use and useful in accomplishing project tasks. The ubiquitous demo is a good starting point to assess the user interface. Online forums and reviews can also be useful.

The range of responsibilities for today's pharmacy administrators is likely not going to shrink in the near future. Software tools that support administration of projects can be quite helpful in organizing and advancing a project to completion. We have provided a starting point for the consideration of project management software. We are interested in your experiences. Email us at foxbren@auburn.edu (Brent) and felkebg@auburn.edu (Bill). ■