Case Management Software Interoperability

Understanding the importance of interoperability for today’s organization
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With the advent of new technology, social service organizations have tremendous new opportunities and advantages facing them. Learning to integrate these new technologies, both for internal purposes and external collaboration, can involve a significant investment of time and resources. However, the benefits of successfully deploying interoperable systems can significantly outweigh the challenges involved in implementation.

Read on to find out why interoperable systems are mission critical for your organization today.

**Internal Benefits of Interoperable Systems**

Every social service organization is unique and will face different benefits and challenges in an attempt to ensure interoperability among their various technology platforms. That being said, there are some substantial benefits which apply to many, if not all, organizations that are able to integrate their information and communication technology (ICT) with their services.

- **Integrated Services** – Integration is a popular word in the social service sector at the moment. Along with trends like integrated case management, service providers are moving towards a more integrated approach to how they view their clients and constituents. Organizations are no longer focusing on providing one specific service but instead are looking at how they can offer a holistic approach to aid their target demographic. As a result, tracking systems, case management systems, administrative systems, and other systems for services which were once disparate now need to be able to “talk” to one another. This is particularly evident in the medical field, as the move to electronic medical records is enabling physicians offering disparate services to see a holistic picture of their patients’ health. Although not as widely discussed, this concept is equally valid and important in the social service sector as well. Any service provider can benefit from uninhibited access to data across platforms, and our ability to think in this vein is the only limiting factor on our ability to revolutionize service delivery.

- **Funding** – As we’ve discussed before, particularly in regards to MIECHV, funders are starting to insist on collaboration. They are becoming increasingly concerned that their dollars not be used
to duplicate efforts, and therefore, they are looking for organizations that are working together to make the most efficient use of resources while bringing measurable results to their clients and communities. Interoperable systems that function cross-domain are a necessary element for this type of collaboration to occur, and they are certainly crucial in order to ensure effectiveness. Nobody wants to lose their funding, so starting to move towards this more integrated model of service providing before funders make it mandatory will help keep your organization ahead of the crowd.

• **Results** – We spend a lot of time talking about evidence-based practices and the importances of outcomes, and having interoperable systems is becoming a key element to successfully accomplishing these objectives. As technology has become better able to track and manage our data, we are relying more and more on data to measure key performance indicators. As a result, we need to be able to take the broadest and most comprehensive data available, which often involves looking cross-platform and cross-framework. Interoperable systems ease this process and enable a new level of reporting and accountability previously unseen in the social service sector. And this new capacity will enable us to further improve our organizations’ effectiveness.

Don’t believe that social services are really moving towards such complexly integrated systems?

It only takes a look across the pond to see that interoperable systems are the wave of the future. In the UK, e-GIF, their e-Government Interoperability Framework, is a set of policies designed to enable the seamless flow of information across governmental and public sector organizations. And the UK is not the only EU country to emphasize the importance of cross-domain data accessibility. With many of the policies recently put in place by the US government in regards to social service providers, we may not be far behind.

SocialSolutions is dedicated to ensuring that our ETO software can help organizations reach a level of interoperability both technically and in terms of collaborating with their communities and sectors at large. And our products, such as ETO Collaborative, can help your organization in its quest for interoperability.
Across the social service sector, two important trends are gaining widespread attention, both of which are crucial to improving interoperability in education. The first, which we talk about a lot, is technology, specifically how new technological developments can help organizations operate more efficiently and improve outcomes. The second trend is collaboration. Organizations and institutions are now starting to focus more on working together and utilizing a more holistic perspective to provide services that truly help solve the problems we are facing.

When these two important trends come together, we get something known as interoperability, or the ability of systems and technology to “speak” to one another. In education, in particular, interoperability is fast becoming an important element in improving student outcomes.

Keep reading to find out how interoperability in education may be a critical factor for student success and how your organization or institution can use interoperable systems to improve outcomes.

**Benefits of Interoperability**

According to the US Department of Education, digital systems interoperability has been a goal of systems architects and standard-bearers for many years but they have experienced limited success. Some of the benefits of interoperability in education would include:

1. Improved ability for schools to exchange information and cope with student mobility issues, whether chronic (e.g. homelessness, foster care, etc.) or temporary (e.g. moving to a new town, dissatisfaction with particular school, etc.)

2. Educational resources customized to the student

3. Increased access to data and advanced reporting that can help researchers and larger institutions like the Department of Education evaluate the effectiveness of the educational system in ways that are not currently viable.
By utilizing interoperable systems to gather and analyze evidence, learning systems can be improved and we can achieve a better understanding of how people learn.

**How to Use Interoperability to Improve Outcomes**

While the benefits of interoperability in education are quite clear, implementation of interoperable systems is another matter. The Department of Education has expressed a commitment to determining how it can aid and encourage educational institutions to focus more on interoperability and to adopt interoperable systems and practices, but it cannot create this change alone.

So how can educators, management, policymakers, and funders begin to make the ideals of interoperability in education a reality?

I’m glad you asked.

1. Download the Office of Education Technology’s report on *Expanding Evidence Approaches for Learning in a Digital World*. This report addresses specific recommended actions that can be taken by other members of the educational system interested in furthering the move towards interoperability.

2. Read the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) report on *Transforming Data to Information in Service of Learning* to better understand the context for interoperability issues.

3. Learn how other educational organizations are shifting their focus to evidence-based practices and performance management models.

4. Make sure your data is in a system that is flexible and shareable. For example, Social Solutions’ Efforts to Outcomes educational case management software allows data to be measured and exported to a Performance Cloud™ where it can be compared with population data as well as data from other systems.

By learning about the state of interoperability in education and beginning to think about how your institution or organization can start to integrate advances in technology in order to move towards a more collaborative model, you set your constituents and students up for the best possible chances of success. And after all, isn’t that what we’re all about?
Of all the social service sectors that are affected by the new trends towards interoperability, healthcare is the one in which interoperable systems are most visible and have received the most publicity. This is largely because health information systems, specifically electronic health records (EHR), affect the public at large, not just any specific underserved population, and so interoperability in healthcare is being watched and discussed among a wide variety of stakeholders.

In many ways, this is a benefit for social service organizations operating in the healthcare sector. Widespread EHR implementation will inevitably trickle down to social service organizations as it becomes accepted practice. However, every healthcare service provider, and particularly those in the social sector, can improve outcomes by taking the time now to understand interoperability in healthcare, the importance of integrated services, and how we can use these new technologies to improve outcomes for the patients and communities we serve.

Read on for more information on how your organization can begin to understand interoperability in healthcare and how to conceptualize its use in your own work.

**What is Interoperability?**

The Health Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS), a global non-profit focused on better health through information technology (IT), defines interoperability in healthcare as:

> “The ability of different information technology systems and software applications to communicate, exchange data, and use the information that has been exchanged. Data exchange schema and standards should permit data to be shared across clinicians, labs, hospitals, pharmacies and patients....” (source)

In the U.S., the Department of Health and Human Services is leading the charge towards widespread implementation of EHR technology. Through their Health IT website, they provide information on how to implement EHRs, relevant information about privacy and security, and case studies from organizations who have
successfully made the switch to EHRs.

That being said, not all EHR systems are equal. The Office of Standards & Interoperability is hard at work attempting to create guidelines to ensure that new health IT products are interoperable, that is, that they can communicate effectively with other platforms. The Direct Project, which enables providers to securely transmit health information over the internet, is another important step towards creating the interoperability we seek.

**How Interoperability Benefits the Social Sector**

Interoperability in healthcare sounds all well and good for the private sector, but it is also costly and time-consuming to implement, which may be a deterrent for organizations working in maternal and child health or providing accessible healthcare to underserved populations. That being said, the benefits of implementing interoperable systems far outweigh the costs:

1. **Integration** – Systems that can speak to one other are an important first step towards providing integrated services. When a care provider can access information about other services a patient has received, other medications they may be on, etc. they can provide better care. These trends also help us move towards a more holistic view of patients and constituents, a position which has been repeatedly proven to improve outcomes.

2. **Collaboration** – We all know there is no point reinventing the wheel, and yet, in the social service sector, we do it all the time. Interoperable systems are one step towards solving this problem. When we can communicate and share, we all benefit. Interoperability enables sharing of data and analysis in new ways that will help us stop duplicating efforts and be able to take more actions towards collaborative solutions.

3. **Funding** – It's no secret that funders want to see collaboration, and they want to see solutions that involve multiple stakeholders. But, more and more, they are also looking for solutions that take a holistic view, addressing more than one social problem and working with collaborators across sectors. The ability to share an analyze data in partnership will become an increasingly important prerequisite for obtaining funding in the future.

**Conclusion**

By focusing on collaborative solutions, integrated services and interoperable systems, we can help take charge of the drive towards interoperability and use it for our benefit, and the benefit of those we serve.
The continuing state of the US economy is doing nonprofits no favors. Many organizations have had to close their doors in the past five years, and those who are still functioning are constantly trying to achieve better results with significantly fewer resources. And yet, there is still a sense of competitiveness in many sectors, or at least, a visible lack of collaborative efforts. Because access to funding has become more limited, organizations feel that they are competing for a share of a finite pie. However, when we begin to think about nonprofit interoperability, it starts to become clear that there is much more potential for us to do good together than alone.

Keep reading to find out how focusing on nonprofit interoperability can help your organization achieve greater success through collaborative efforts.

What Does Interoperability Mean for Nonprofits?

The phrase “nonprofit interoperability” is being thrown around a lot, but sometimes the meaning is unclear. The term, “interoperability” specifically relates to Information Technology (IT). It refers to the ability of a technology system to be able to communicate and share data with other systems.

However, implementing interoperable systems can affect much more than just one’s technology infrastructure. Nonprofit interoperability introduces a whole new way to look at one’s services and how those services are offered. With proper management, interoperable systems can lead to a whole host of benefits your organization might not have recognized without first attempting to embrace interoperability.

Benefits of Nonprofit Interoperability

1. **Integrated Services** – As a service provider, you’re probably very busy doing what you do best, i.e. providing services. And yet, in an increasingly integrated world, it is no longer enough to just do your own job. Your clients probably need and are receiving a wide variety of services from many organizations. By thinking not only about how you can do your own job but also about how you can offer holistic assistance to the people and communities you aim to serve, your nonprofit can become a leader in the kind of solutions that our society so desperately needs. Integrated services are the
wave of the future, and nonprofit interoperability in an important step to helping us get there.

2. **Collaboration** – Even in sectors that don’t seem to necessarily need interoperability, such as the rare disease sector, non-profits are finding that collaboration is key. When data storage systems such as case management systems or disease registries can share information among themselves, organizations can analyze that data, to discover new similarities or just to avoid the task of having to collect the same information twice. Particularly in sectors like rare disease, where data is not always easy to come by, these collaborative efforts can make the difference between failure and success.

3. **Funding** – We need to get out of a scarcity mindset, wherein we all think we’re competing against one another for the same slice of the pie. Instead, by pooling resources and thinking in more collaborative ways, we can help funders by enabling their funds to extend farther and do more good. Funders are looking for collaboration because they know their dollars only stretch so far, and they want to encourage out-of-the-box thinking and sharing between stakeholders. Thinking along the lines of nonprofit interoperability can help our organizations achieve the dual purpose of appearing more attractive to funders and doing more good with less.

**Conclusion**

Alone, we can only achieve so much. And yet, in this age of new and incredibly powerful infrastructure, we have the opportunity to change the whole paradigm under which nonprofits operate and how services are delivered to those in need. By viewing nonprofit interoperability as more than simply technology – as a way of doing more good – we can all stand together…and change the world.