Collaborative business models, utilized in concert with integrated technology, can drive improved client outcomes

Reflections on the Leadership for a Networked World:
The 2013 Human Services Summit

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TBR Perspective

While the impact of public sector budgetary constraints is often discussed at a federal level, minimal attention has been paid to their impact on small, state or county-based human services agencies that provide vital social services to some of our nation’s most vulnerable citizens. As these local agencies are constantly pressed to improve care for their clients, they are coming under increased strain due to overtaxed technology systems, the introduction of disruptive technologies, diminishing federal funding and an increasing number of constituents requiring care.

The 2013 Human Services Summit, developed by Leadership for a Networked World and hosted by the Technology and Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard in collaboration with Accenture, brought together a broad range of human services practitioners from federal, state and local agencies to discuss the convergence of changing regulatory environments, macroeconomic challenges pressuring funding, increasingly tech-savvy service consumers, and the role of disruptive technologies in mitigating these concerns. The Summit’s case studies and breakout sessions presented an interactive environment, through which individuals in various stages of regulatory overhaul and disruptive technology implementation discussed successes and challenges while soliciting advice from those further along the implementation curve. Many individuals were repeat participants of the Summit, which encouraged diverse conversations related to the unique challenges facing their respective agencies.
Throughout the presentations, workshops and conversations, three key challenges stood out:

1. How can technology be leveraged to increase service value and the rate of successful outcomes given the intense current focus on meeting Affordable Care Act requirements on tight deadlines?
2. How can technology be used to integrate information from disparate agencies to break down silos and provide holistic care for clients?
3. Once the definition of a successful client outcome is defined by a given agency, how can analytics-driven KPIs be used to measure outcome achievement and predict best practices for caretakers in similar future instances?

The Summit attendees exuded positive sentiment around the adoption of new technology and integration of IT systems within and across human services organizations. However, panelists and participants agreed roadblocks exist within their organizations that can prevent them from winning the buy-in necessary to facilitate IT transformation. Conversations touched on how to utilize strong business cases to create stakeholder buy-in for transformative efforts in this era of disruptive technology and what pain points organizations need to be aware of during the implementation process. Accenture executives emphasized that, even in large IT modernization programs, the human “change management” aspect is often more difficult than the technology implementation. One panelist explained the challenge is less in the planning aspect, but rather in getting individuals within an organization to believe in and support the transformation, as people remain a key factor in relaying information and implementing new practices.

As within the private sector, the key remains immediate, documentable value creation for the workstreams immediately impacted from the implementation. Much resistance from those who are involved in the active delivery of care comes from the perception that those in charge of driving change view clients in terms of dollars and cents, creating a disconnect with caretakers for whom the impact on the P&L is less of a concern.

**Effective use of disruptive technology to improve client care will increase efficiency, helping allay funding constraints by allowing caretakers to “do more with less”**

While IT transformation is often utilized as a lever to reduce long-term costs, the largest benefit for human services organizations may exist in the increased efficiency derived through IT modernization efforts, subsequently improving service delivery to an individual client and freeing up time and resources to be dedicated to higher-value work. Participants at the Summit shared ideas on using technology to solve issues of varying complexity, from simple uses, such as using social media to connect with high-risk clients and inform them of available care options, to the more complex leverage of analytics to identify patterns in client care to establish outcomes and future best practices.

**Increased collaboration among human services organizations is the next step in providing holistic care and improving client outcomes**

A second key factor to identifying outcomes, improving protocol, leveraging predictive analytics capabilities and ultimately improving client care is interagency collaboration to assess and analyze inputs from various sources or agencies; ultimately, to overcome the silos that exist between organizations. While integrating IT systems is more of a functional task that will help organizations integrate and streamline the collection of and access to common
client information, the bigger concern is establishing a strong business case for transformative efforts that promote a net benefit at each agency level, from director to immediate caretaker, as each position has a unique job function that requires a different set of inputs.

One way this discussion was framed was through the lens of the aggregate client case, instead of agency-specific client cases, in order to address multiple problems concurrently. A great example was a discussion surrounding the sharing of sensitive client information across multiple agencies when there are additional care requirements. For example, how can a parent with substance abuse issues, who also has small children, receive necessary care for their own challenges while also addressing the need to incorporate care for their children? In this situation, multiple social services organizations such as rehabilitation, counseling, unemployment and child services may be required to coordinate care. A streamlined flow of information would provide caretakers with a “big picture” view as they collaborate to create a plan of action, ideally leading to fewer redundancies and improved outcomes for the patient.

While the idea of increased collaboration and integrating technology was well received, key roadblocks exist to streamlining information through the use of technology, such as securing funding for system design and information, and challenges around protecting sensitive information.

**Agencies can leverage analytics to improve decision making internally, identify outcomes and subsequently impact policies**

One breakout topic of note was the use of analytics to share and analyze data from various human services organizations. Findings from analytics could ultimately influence policy creation, improve service provision and improve the use of evidence-based decision making to drive protocols that enhance client outcomes. Analytics is one of the areas of strategic opportunity highlighted by Accenture — and is an area where the company is already working with human services agencies. Panelists highlighted an array of nontechnical capabilities human service agencies need to get value from analytics, and some participants stressed they are inundated with data but struggle to determine the right way to use it. Predictive analytics can help leaders within organizations enhance their focus on identifying the “right next thing” in conjunction with the “right now thing”, which will help organizations more accurately address the root cause of a challenge as opposed to just the symptom.

One opinion that arose from the discussions was that the federal government is able to accurately measure outcomes on a grand scale, given the varying demographics at play from the broad range of constituents within a state or community. As a result, the onus shifts toward the state or community, which are the in the best position to help funnel information to the federal government that aids in the creation of actionable policies that positively impact client care. This opinion ties back to an overall topic at the Summit: Increased collaboration among interconnected care providers, facilitated by integrated technology and desiloed working models, will help solve individual clients’ challenges. As individual challenges are increasingly tackled, aggregate outcomes should inherently improve, resulting in more effective use of limited funds, increased patient care delivery and the establishment of best practices related to complex, multifaceted client needs.
Effective utilization of disruptive technologies will be key to the success of enhancing client services while maintaining cost controls in an era of austerity

Today we see private sector demand for converged IT and shared databases enabling business process redesign driven by dual motivators of enhanced profitability and improved service delivery. Absent the profit motivator within many human services organizations, quantifying the incentive to utilize technology to improve delivery makes developing a strong business case exponentially more difficult. Additionally, increasingly constrained agency funding compounds this problem, creating a cycle in which current systems are struggling to measure holistic client outcomes; however, positive outcomes are required to free up funding for new systems. The challenge for human services agency leadership is to create a compelling enough business case to break through this cycle.

Our key takeaway from the Summit was that utilizing disruptive technology will increasingly become a vital contributor in enhancing the efficiency with which human services are delivered to clients, particularly given the rising demand for human services and growing complexity involved in coordinated care efforts. There are certainly challenges involved in implementation of technology modernization efforts, such as stagnant (at best) budgets, creating buy-in from key stakeholders within an agency, and breaking through the siloed nature of public agency work. However, by creating effective business cases, establishing and accurately measuring client outcomes and establishing stakeholder buy-in, a great deal of opportunity exists to “do more with less.” Improving patient care while cutting related costs is an imperative that pervades all public agencies in today’s era of budget austerity, and is unlikely to fade in the near future.

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