

Witt/Kieffer Focus Group Findings Shed Light on Changing Healthcare IT Role

By Linda Hodges

Healthcare IT investments are increasingly strategic, in addition to operationally imperative, and the changing roles in the office of the CIO reflect this trend. The IT practice of Witt/Kieffer, the nation's largest executive search firm specializing in health care and higher education, recently held a focus group of healthcare CIOs to discuss the evolution of the IT role in hospitals and health systems.

The increasingly strategic role of IT in healthcare organizations appears to be a reflection of three major influences:

- 1) Information technology itself has advanced, spurring organizations across all industries to communicate, share data and process transactions better, cheaper and faster.
- 2) Healthcare information technology applications increasingly integrate financial and clinical processes and databases, resulting in care transformation, not just business automation.
- 3) New skills and expertise are now needed within the office of the CIO, who is increasingly seen as a strategic business partner on the hospital's executive team.

Hospitals and health systems are expecting IT strategic plans that tie to overall strategic plans. There is a new, shared responsibility among the senior management team for ensuring that IT investments advance organizational success and result in new approaches to care delivery based on getting the right information to the right person at the right time.

As a result, CIOs increasingly report to the CEO (50%) or COO (12%) and new roles are emerging that reflect this heightened strategic importance. Nurses and pharmacists with an interest in informatics and the emergence of the Chief Medical Information Officer are examples of this trend. Project management offices are being created to support the complex, multi-year clinical and business application implementations. Enterprise-wide virtual data warehouses are being developed and new roles in business intelligence and knowledge management have been created to enhance strategic and operational decision-making. Safety and quality officers are becoming a part of the office of the CIO, reflecting the critical "24/7" nature of electronic health records. Chief Technology Officers are often recruited when the technical infrastructure spans multiple geographies and sites of care.

Succession planning is also becoming increasingly important, as the IT function becomes indispensable and complex to manage. However, a recent Witt/Kieffer study of CIOs revealed that only 25% of organizations have formal IT succession plans in place.

For more information about Witt/Kieffer and how they identify outstanding IT leaders in health care and higher education, visit www.wittkieffer.com.