HEALTH MIDWEST: AN EMERGING INTERNET LINKED REGIONAL NETWORK.

David Voran, MD
Chief Medical Information Officer
2416 East Meyer Blvd
Kansas City MO 64132
davoran@healthmidwest.org

The failure of many DotComs correlated with traditional brick-and-mortar businesses adding dotcom services and being transformed into "click-and-mortar" business. In the process dotcom businesses were disinter mediated as the web became the side entrance into the back office for many customer services. Health Midwest, the predominant Integrated Delivery Network in the greater Kansas City area, recognized this process at the highest corporate levels and began re-examining its own Internet presence and more importantly its use of Internet technologies.

In addition to its web presence, Health Midwest has been quietly exploiting Internet technologies, using them to augment, or in many cases replace, existing technologies. In the process it has been quietly transforming itself and is becoming an Internet-based organization. In addition to web technologies, Health Midwest is completing the migration of its entire network from proprietary, dedicated connections to Internet public switched protocols. It is now moving many of its voice services over to internet-based ATM switches at considerable savings to the organization. Its materials management structure has been reorganized to where older labor-intensive purchasing processes have been replaced by streamlined, integrated e-commerce processes. Some discharge planning processes have moved from equally labor-intensive efforts to internet-based modes of operation. Throughout the organization many processes are also being re-examined and converted to those fundamentally enabled by internet-based technologies.

This movement is having a profound influence on the culture of the organization. As the "net-based" thinking permeates the organization new ways of making decisions are being incorporated into this Integrated Delivery Network that will indeed make it a true Integrated Delivery Network.

WEB

Health Midwest's Internet began as a static "brochure-ware" site spearheaded by its marketing division. Managed by a coalition of volunteers who met regularly this first phase gave way to a second phase in which interactive components were added. This second phase involved forming several relationships with external content providers such as drkoop.com. Customers could search for clinically relevant content, locate physicians, ask questions and register for wellness classes. In addition, the web site became the portal to clinical and financial systems for clinicians and executives. Health Midwest is now moving into a third phase that is targeted at bringing its customers "back home" and linking them with Health Midwest's core clinical and financial systems. This next phase is targeted at redesigning the web presence to answer foremost questions of any given external or internal user.

CONNECTIVITY AND NETWORKS

Health Midwest's Internet evolution has paralleled a migration from limited dial-up remote access, designed to facilitate tightly controlled access to mainframe data, to an Internet-based access to a wide variety of mission critical applications at much higher speeds and lower costs per unit of transaction while maintaining necessary levels of security. Exploitation of available Internet technologies is effectively extending the offices and walls of the organization and, in some cases, obliterating boundaries.

The success of this migration is now working its way inward where Internet-based technologies are replacing all of the old networking protocols and legacy systems. The outward reaching Internet effort combined with the parallel move to internal Internet standards has created an environment that allows a seamless connection between the innermost operations and the most distant relationships. It is this opportunity to which Health Midwest's Internet strategy is targeted.

CULTURE AND SYSTEMS THINKING

Health Midwest's corporate culture is undergoing parallel transformations. Like many other "Integrated Delivery Networks" Health Midwest was created by amalgamating independent medical facilities with their own cultures, processes and histories. This made thinking and working as a system very difficult, if not impossible. The internet-based information infrastructure that has been created is facilitating the migration from a facility-centric network to a fully functional system. Each person is now using the same internet-based communication tools, following the identical access procedures, sharing the same databases and speaking the same language.

PATIENT DIRECTED SERVICES

The previously mentioned changes are allowing the organization to think seriously of opening up many of its services to the general public. Many legislative, legal, technical and process hurdles need to be overcome before the organization completes this last move but there is a growing sense of certainty that Health Midwest will make this move.

SUMMARY

These adaptive changes are all predicated on the technologies enabled by the Internet. As health care exploits them we can expect many other organizations will transform themselves in similar fashion to the benefit of all who need their services.