

Chapter 6.5

Practical Applications of Case Management Software for Practitioners in Health and Human Services

Lesley Cooper

Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Dana Fox

Athena Software, Canada

Diane Stanley-Horn

Athena Software, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to demonstrate the capabilities and practical applications of a case management software system for not-for-profit organizations. Whilst a variety of software systems are available, for the purposes of this chapter the authors will use/refer to “Penelope,” a system designed by Athena, a Kitchener, Ontario software company. Penelope is a sophisticated piece of technology that can collect and analyze information on clients, services, human resources and outcomes. Although a wide range of data can be collected using this software, it cannot make decisions about what to record or how to scrutinize the data. The “what to record” and the “how to analyze and interpret” are management and clinical decisions. Effective use of case

management software requires technical, management and analytical skills combined with leadership and imagination. Case management software systems and the information they provide are only as good as the planning and organizational systems in which they are used. The best starting point for practitioners and managers seeking answers to questions about their clients, services, community and policy, and to maximize the capabilities of case management software systems is the development and application of a program logic model unique to the agency in question. A program logic model focuses on the services and programs provided by the agency describing its’ inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes. Understanding how to develop and apply their model allows practitioners and managers to perform tasks such as performance monitoring,

experimental and quasi experimental approaches program evaluations, and client satisfaction and outcome studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of their services to funding bodies, consumer groups, and their boards of directors whilst also providing a tool that can be used to enhance agency performance.

'To err is human but to really foul things up requires a computer'. -- Farmers' Almanac for 1978 'Capsules of Wisdom' in Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (2004, p.670:70).

INTRODUCTION

Case management software programs enable organizations to collect data describing their client population and service provision as well as the outcomes and effectiveness of these services. These programs facilitate agency collection of data about clients and the services provided to them and may be extended to enabling communication, scheduling, billing, clinical notes and evaluation tools. Case management software systems may be purchased as a propriety package or designed in house by organizations to manage their client service data. For the purposes of this chapter, we will confine our comments to the Penelope Case Management Software developed by Athena Software, based in Kitchener, Ontario. This package was designed for health and human service agencies and is based on traditional concepts of case management. In this chapter we will describe Athena's Penelope and use it to demonstrate its' capabilities and practical applications in needs studies, program evaluation, quasi experimental designs demonstrating outcomes and efficacious services.

We will focus on the practical applications of case management software for a variety of reasons. Studies on the not for profit sector reveal that agencies collect data about clients and their programs (get authors). This data collection

process is traditionally paper based frequently imposing an ever increasing administrative burden with organizations committing time and substantial resources to meet the specific needs of funders rather than those of the organization and its clients. Eakin (2007, p.1) in a review of accountability and compliance requirements in Canada asserts that *nonprofits are swept up in complex, time consuming and very detailed accountability reporting systems and controls*. Whilst meeting funders' requirements, many not for profit agencies are unable to transform the data into a form suitable for purposes more immediately useful to them. These purposes encompass grant proposal development, program evaluation, fiscal monitoring, project planning, and enhancing their understanding of social problems as well as assisting with day to day management issues. Few organizations employ specialist staff to advise on using and analyzing existing data. Instead of hiring skilled staff to perform these tasks in house, they are likely to use external agencies and consultants at great expense. In this situation, the not-for-profits are at the mercy of the funders' demands and perceptions and the consultant's model of good evaluations. The clear view from the not for profit perspective is that they collect data required by their funders, but are not able to utilize this data for internal purposes because they are overstretched. Not for profits are caught in a dilemma. On one hand they are expected to collect data but on the other, the demands and costs of compliance with funder accountability requirements mean that there is little time or in-house skill to use the data for management and evaluation.

ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENTS

The not-for-profit sector faces particular challenges from funding bodies which are increasingly requiring greater accountability. This accountability has two components traditional financial accountability and, increasingly, measurement

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