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Smart tech strategies can help CBOs thrive—and better fulfill their mission

By **Ginna Baik**

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As America's demographic shift to an older society progresses, technological innovations will play a vital role in helping older adults to live independently. Community-based organizations (CBO) focused on the care of older adults and that invest in a technology strategy will be better able to deliver the best digital tools and services to their clients.

Technology *can* help older adults to maintain independence—and to enjoy a higher quality of life. To assure success, however, CBOs must begin with a sound technology strategy that is aligned with their mission.

CBOs Are Often Unclear on Tech's Potential

Although the shift in the nonprofit sector toward managed or integrated care has been ongoing for decades, many CBOs still are in the beginning stages of introducing technology to staff and clients. How are CBOs and long-term services and supports organizations interacting with technology? And what types of technology offer the greatest impact for the client experience and for staff productivity?

Understanding how the continuum of technology works in a community is a challenge. Sometimes the “new, shiny” technology is what drives CBOs to begin employing it; this often ends up overshadowing the basic foundation of a secure infrastructure and secured wire-less networks.

Without a solid foundation, the best software or cloud-based solution often won't achieve its potential due to poor connectivity or network issues. As strategic business development manager for Senior Care at CDW-Healthcare, I'm often asking CBOs, before they begin forming a strategy, to differentiate between technology and innovation: “Is your technology house built on solid ground, or will it collapse because it's being held [together] by a thread or built on sand?”

The first step for CBOs that want to introduce technology is to demystify what technology does today, and its future potential. For a digitally timid industry in which staff and older adults may not be as savvy as Millennial digital natives, technology can induce a level of cartoonishness reminiscent of *The Jetsons*—tech is too far-fetched to be real. This effect sometimes paralyzes organizations from taking action to invest in technology that can make an impact today. Pushing past this fear of change and new technology will be the first step in forging any strategic process.

Conversely, the opposite also can occur: sometimes technology's “cool factor” distracts organizations from prioritizing the right kind of technology, at the right time. Technology does not operate in a vacuum and is one of many tools that enables CBOs to operate more efficiently and provide better-coordinated care.

Once an organization moves past the novelty and false perceptions of technology, it can start to really vet tried-and-tested, best-in-class solutions. The key to success is tying purpose to the technology—how will it solve problems for staff and transform the client experience? Often, the focus is on just adopting technology instead of first exploring true motives for its use.

Identify Needs and Requirements

One of the hardest parts of creating a technology strategy is to identify an organization's current key needs and requirements. One example would be replacing a manual (and cumbersome) client scheduling process. Such a need would serve as a compass in designing a technology strategy or strategic plan.

The plan should be flexible and ever-evolving, tied to the organization's mission and tactics and-or requirements for problem-solving. Then, technology adoption becomes a more organic process because there is a bridge to workflow efficiency or better client experience. Plans also should include a timeline and phases—validation points where an organization can pause to evaluate the strategy while executing the master strategic plan.

One example might be a CBO that wishes to provide a means to decrease digital isolation and increase connections and purpose through an intergenerational program. Currently, there is a digital divide between older adults and digital native Millennials and Gen Z.

Connecting these generations would not only bridge the digital gap, but also open opportunities to learn from one another. The CBO would need a strategy that integrates technology in existing programming, such as technology training, so older adults could learn from digital native trainers about how to connect with friends and family using video chat, email or texting. The CBO could also tie in a reverse trainer program in which the older adult teaches the digital trainer oral histories and family legacy stories. This simultaneous back-and-forth exchange of knowledge empowers both student and trainer, and meets the CBO's goals, transforming a lifelong learning program by extending its benefits.

Another technology might track care coordination program outcomes. Receiving health information directly from an older client via technology, such as health trackers, could lessen episodic health situations, as any concerns are solved proactively before becoming an emergency.

Other Benefits and Efficiencies

Another role for technology is to increase access to services offered by the CBO, such as automated text message reminders about upcoming appointments, medication reminders to manage chronic conditions, online registration for evidence-based programming and round-the-clock access to a searchable resource database—all of which are often built into the same system that manages the CBO's internal operations.

Technology also holds great potential for helping CBOs to capture outcomes data. Taking the guesswork out of outcomes that previously had been “measured” by gut feeling means CBOs can back up assumptions with data and make more effective choices with clients, while proving the worth of community-based health solutions for potential healthcare partners.

This technology-enabled data leave the CBO time for an increased focus on care. The more time CBOs can spend on caring for older adults in community, the greater the opportunities for this population to remain independent and enjoy a higher quality of life. ■

Ginna Baik is strategic business development manager for Senior Care at CDW-Healthcare working out of the San Diego area. Beyond the technology itself, CDW's involvement with providers of services to older adults helps organizations to better understand the market's many nuances and how technology is improving the quality of care delivered, but also improving communication, programming and overall engagement.

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