

Conducting a Strategic Review of Decision Support
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Hospitals have made significant investments in Decision Support systems over the past decade. Because a large number of these systems were purchased and implemented several years ago, many organizations have reached that point where they feel some reassessment is in order. Has the “promise” of Decision Support really been fulfilled? Has it been worth the investment? If not, what changes need to be made to maximize the return on DSS?

In order to answer these questions and others, some organizations have decided that a strategic review of Decision Support is warranted. The goal of this process is to address one or more of the following questions:

1. Should the DSS be replaced, either by another vendor, or by upgrading to the latest version of the software (same vendor)?
2. Should additional DSS modules be added in order to maximize use of the system? and/or;
3. Even if no additional software is purchased, how can the organization make better use of the existing system?

If questions 1 and 2 are the focus of the review, the software vendor(s) will be involved in this process and will, to a large extent, direct the review process. If the focus is on question 3 (better use of the same system), the process will be an internal one. The comments below are intended to address how this type of internal review would be conducted, with the assumption that the organization is keeping the existing system.

The strategic review is a project with a defined set of goals, and a time frame determined at the outset of the project. The review should be completed in a relatively short period of time. Typically it can be completed in a 3-4 week period.

The process of completing the strategic review consists of meeting with several key personnel, and reviewing the system itself. The strategic review will address the following areas:

- Foundation
- Internal infrastructure of DSS
- Current usage
- Goals

Foundation: The assessment will involve a review of the DSS data structures in an effort to determine if changes should be made to improve the integrity and usability of the data. A meeting with Information Technology (specifically, the interface programmer) will address data base questions: Are there data fields that should be added to the interfaces? Is the update frequency meeting the organization’s needs, or should it be changed to make the data more concurrent? Have APC’s been integrated into DSS? Severity information?

Net Revenue: Are the net revenue calculations up-to-date and accurate? Has net revenue been reconciled to the financial statements? If not, develop an action plan to operationalize

this.

Costs: A review of the cost accounting system is part of an overall DSS review. Depending on the organization's cost accounting status, this review can encompass:

- Assessing the validity and accuracy of the cost accounting standards
- Identifying new departments that need to be studied
- Identifying existing departments that need to be restudied in light of charge master revisions
- Reviewing the overhead allocation model
- Reviewing the fixed/variable assumptions for validity
- Looking at the cost/benefit tradeoff of certain aspects of the cost accounting model (Do we really need all that detail?)
- Determining ways to streamline the cost accounting process to ensure that up-to-date cost data is available to DSS users

Maintenance: Are the tables in DSS being maintained on a timely basis? Is there information being maintained manually that could be interfaced directly from feeder systems and thus streamlined?

Internal infrastructure: The strategic review process will involve an assessment of whether the organizational structure is helping or hindering the efficient usage of DSS. Who is the Decision Support Manager and where is that position in the organization? Most organizations have placed this position in Finance, due to the fact that much of the required maintenance concerns financial data, but some organizations have opted to place this position under Information Technology, Planning, or Administration. Is the organizational structure prohibiting DSS information from getting outside Finance?

Communication among the DSS users should be addressed as part of the review. Is there an internal DSS User Group that meets on a regular basis? Perhaps such a group can be initiated as a means to improve communication among users, and develop goals for DSS.

Staffing and the "Mack Truck" theory: Do we have the right people maintaining DSS? Is our staff sufficiently cross-trained so that the system will not stagnate if the key person/people maintaining the system leave or transfer?

Education: One of the outcomes of the strategic review will be a plan for education. The plan will indicate which individuals need training, and whether that training will be provided by the vendor (either at their offices, or onsite), or internally by the DSS Manager and/or the other system "gurus". In addition to system training, there may be a need for education for the information users. A Decision Support overview can be conducted at a management meeting,

Documentation: Is there internal documentation on the processes specific to the organization? The vendor's user manuals are a helpful reference, but only go so far when looking at a process that is specific to the organization. The persons responsible for these processes should document the steps that they take to run and maintain them.

Current Usage: A goal of the strategic review is to assess current usage of DSS, and determine areas of under-utilization. To reach this goal, interviews are scheduled with several key users of DSS information. This list might include the following managers;

Marketing/planning
Financial planning
Managed care
Patient accounting
Case management/utilization review
Budgeting

The interviews will address such questions as: How is DSS meeting your information needs? Are there information needs that are not being met? Is DSS the right place to meet these needs? Is there information produced by another system or process that could perhaps be produced in a more efficient manner out of DSS? Is DSS being effectively used to support the strategic planning process? This is an area in which DSS has been typically under-utilized.

This portion of the review could also include contacting other organizations that use the same system, and inquiring about their usage of the system, obstacles they have encountered, and successful strategies they have employed.

Obstacles: The interviews with DSS information users will probably reveal any obstacles to improved system utilization. After these obstacles have been identified, the review process should address possible ways to remove such obstacles.

DSS Distribution: The review will also evaluate the current methods of distributing DSS information, and determine if other methods should be employed. Are we taking advantage of the system's capabilities for electronic (even Web-based) distribution of DSS information? Do we have the right tools for this?

Goals: The final outcome of the strategic review is a list of DSS goals, and an action plan to implement these goals. The action plan should identify the responsible party for each task, as well as a targeted time frame. Of course, once an action plan is developed, it must be monitored. The status of the action plan can be reviewed at meetings of the DSS group.

Conducting a strategic review of Decision Support will require some time and effort, but is a proactive step that will ensure the viability of the system within the organization.