



Using IT strategically for growth

By Rob Cosinuke | June 1, 2016

Running IT for large and small healthcare concerns, Dick Escue learned the merit of standing in each of his customer's shoes.

"As a leader of the organization, my interest has to be the entire organization," Escue says. "I don't own anyone else's issues, but I need to be aware of them."



Escue, former chief information officer at Valley View Hospital in Glendale, Colo. and now national healthcare lead for Asynchrony Labs, has won numerous awards for his efforts, including the 2010 Cloud Pioneer of the Year. In 2003, he landed on the "100 Most Resourceful" list from CIO Magazine.

athenaInsight sat down with Escue [ed. note: this interview was conducted while Escue was still CIO of Valley View Hospital] to discuss why IT departments should morph from merely keeping the lights on to becoming strategic business partners with their entire organizations.

You've been a CIO in healthcare for a while, running IT across across a variety of types of hospital

systems and ownership models. Is there any one philosophy or inspiration you draw on in your role?

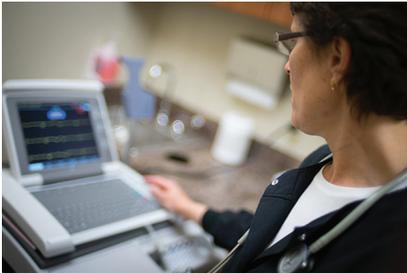
When I was living in Memphis, Tennessee, there was this little company called Federal Express. Now we all know it as FedEx. And the joke was "We're FedEx – we're an IT company that delivers packages." That was really compelling, and I was kind of envious. Because their commitment to IT was so profound. It was clear to me that FedEx thought they could totally differentiate themselves through information they could provide their customers and employees.

And so eventually I ended up in healthcare and I felt healthcare needed that same mentality. What is it that I can do to use IT to put valuable information into the hands of the providers and the patients. What can we do to make a physician want to practice with us, or make a patient want to come to this facility?

You've run large IT teams with 500 people and lean teams with just 20. Is there a leadership take-away that encompasses both worlds?

I have been the CIO at some big health systems where we had huge IT departments and pretty hefty budgets. Then I worked for a for-profit, publicly

traded healthcare provider in the post acute care space, which was a very different environment where they wanted everything, but you weren't going to get any budget. And believe it or not, the best learning experience I ever had was working for the for-profit and having all those pressures and you didn't get a nickel without a really hard ROI.



That is what opened me up to looking at whether I really have to do it all myself. I learned that I can pay for services and have somebody manage the networks. I did a lot with Sales Force, and I did a lot with Google. At one point we had 11,000 physical therapists working for us and we made the iPhone or iPod Touch everybody's computer. People said, "Oh you can't do that and be HIPAA compliant" or "You can't do that and accomplish mobile device management for that size organization." They were all wrong. It was eye-opening.

And have you maintained that philosophy at Valley View Hospital?

Yes. So now I'm out in Western Colorado, Glenwood Springs, at Valley View Hospital and it's various clinics. We don't need a giant IT staff to support this model, so we have a staff of 22. We rely heavily on managed services for the network and telecommunications. We use a commercial data center for the hospital and we run athena.

"You shift from not just running this ever growing overhead function to becoming part of the growth strategy of the company, and it's a lot more fun." - Dick Escue

This then frees up my IT team to be very strategic to the organization. We can start saying, "How can we

use IT to help grow the business? How can we use IT to lower our costs, lower our overhead and grow the bottom line? That is really game changing for an organization, and it's game changing for a CIO. You shift from just running this ever growing overhead function to becoming part of the growth strategy of the company, and it's a lot more fun.

I guess once you make that break, you gain some freedom and can start to visualize what each customer requires from IT.

Yes, and quite frankly, as a CIO, this is a lot more fun. I really don't have to worry about whether I'm keeping everything patched. I have that stuff covered as services now, so I'm getting to focus on the business issues, the growth strategies, physician recruitment, physician retention, nursing recruitment and retention, what are we doing to make their lives a little better? Can we do things to help them be more productive?

So I spend a lot of time with the Chief Nursing Officer, for example, and I know what her biggest issues or biggest priorities are. One of the most fun things about being in IT is being able to make the customer's problems go away. Over time, I have tried to build a department full of people who like to do that sort of thing.

How would your team members define your leadership style?

I think I have been characterized as hands-off. While I like to talk about what we need to do, I never tell my team how to do it. Sometimes the biggest value I can add is to paint the big picture, because we all own our piece of things. While I'm responsible for IT, as a leader of the organization, my interests have to be that of the entire organization.



In a high-velocity profession each of us learns at least one thing, perhaps from a mentor, that resonates over time. Did you have someone like that?

One man in particular back at Baptist gave me my big break, if you will. His name was Bob Gordon, a senior executive who made me the company's first CIO. What I got from Bob – and I mean, still to this day I repeat what he says and use it as a coaching point – is to take the high road.

That's because you get beat up in IT a lot, just like you do in Human Resources or Accounts Payable. We're not generating revenue for the company, but nobody can do his job if IT is not really clicking on all cylinders. That means you don't always get treated nicely. What I learned, and what I have passed on still to this day, is that when the pressure is on, take the high road, and you'll never lose.

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