


Revitalizing *Your* Information System

What can informatics do for food and nutrition services? How about higher levels of compliance, quality, and satisfaction among your staff and residents—for starters.

by | *Michael Babines*



Each of us today uses computers in some way, even if it's just to surf the Web or send email. You program your TiVo, your cell phone, even your coffee maker. But as a manager of a food and nutrition operation, you may wonder: Are you using computers to their fullest potential? Are you making your job easier? Are you controlling critical factors such as quality, service, and cost?

Here's where *informatics* steps in. What's that mean? Informatics is a combination of data and information processing (software) automation employed to produce results. For example, in your system, you have a recipe that yields 50 portions. That's the data. You need to scale that recipe to yield 136 portions. You use a computer program to calculate the measurements and scale the recipe. That's the result.

The Value of Informatics

What can informatics do for food and nutrition services? If you're not sure, ask yourself these questions: Are you placing labels on menus, or handwriting information on labels? Is your storeroom manager using a clipboard and counting inventory only to reenter that information into an online service or calling in the order to vendors? Does your clinical team extract information from the patient chart and manually calculate intake records and nutrition risk? All of these tasks are easily managed with automation and the results will be more accurate and timely.

How much time does your team spend to log, track, verify, consolidate, and retrieve information and results to support compliance requirements? This too can be automated and give you and your team the information you need to provide higher levels of compliance, quality, and satisfaction.

Once you start to integrate software processes into your daily operations, the professionalism of the staff increases, as they now have access to tools that allow them to be more efficient and effective in their job routines. By freeing yourself and your team from excess busy work that can be automated, you can spend more time in human interactions—interacting with your residents, and coaching your work team. This leads to greater job satisfaction and retention, an often overlooked benefit of a strong software system.

What is "Good Enough"?

Foodservice managers readily appreciate the value of informatics. Yet, adoption within the industry is slow. For example, among 6,800 hospitals in the US and Canada, only 10.5 percent have fully automated food and nutrition operations. Why is that?

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Some managers—and healthcare administrators—say things like, “We’re OK. Accuracy rates are high, and our operation is good enough without the investment in software systems.”

Is “good enough” acceptable for your organization? Consider this data from the quality review team of a 400-bed hospital. If 99.9 percent accuracy were accepted as “good enough,” every year:

- 4 newborn babies would be dropped in the delivery room
- 110 X-rays would be diagnosed incorrectly
- 2,850 medications would be given to the wrong patient
- 1,005 lab results would be wrong
- 416 meal trays would be given to the wrong patient

We work in a service industry where the objectives are simple, the stakes are high, and there is actually no room for error. Mistakes—even just sometimes—can compromise the well-being of your clients and damage your reputation. Informatics is the tool that can prevent the critical errors, such as serving milk to a client who is allergic or serving high-potassium orange juice to a client in advanced kidney failure. It’s also the tool that can help you “do everything right” on the menu, and serve what’s been ordered, to ensure not only accuracy and safety, but full satisfaction.

A Leadership Approach to Informatics

Some managers say that they are eager to implement strong informatics programs, but are running into roadblocks. Here are some tips that may help you tackle your needs with a strong leadership approach:

Be a Leader

We have all learned that a manager is responsible for things like planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. But there is a significant distinction between management and leadership. Leadership revolves around a vision and the importance of making effective change. To serve as a leader, you need to create a vision, align your team to that vision, and motivate your team to accomplish it. A leader creates timelines and describes tangible results (try describing the meal tray you envision!), and provides measurable goals (e.g., a 10 percent improvement in satisfaction ratings, a 5 percent dip in food costs, a 100 percent accuracy rate for compliance with special diets and food preferences). Are you a leader for your operation?

Visualize the Process

When trying to improve quality and systems, it’s easy to look at the status quo and then imagine tweaking it. But did you ever try just starting from a blank screen, and mapping out the meal service you (and your clients) envision? This is a great starting point that will help you think out of the box. Next, you need to take a hard look at current processes. How does product get to your receiving dock, into storage, then production, service...and to your clients? How do you track nutritional intake? Financial results? What’s working? What isn’t? How can you bring your systems into alignment with your vision? It’s important to realize that you do not need to adapt your system to fit software. Instead, your vision should drive your automation plan.

Talk to Your Boss

Budget approval for an investment in software is one of the most often-cited reasons for *not* automating a dietary operation. Is this you? If so, you may need to talk straight

As a leader, you need to build a team to make informatics work. Get input from others, outside your own department, who should be on-board with your automation plan, such as: IT, Nursing, RDs, and others.



with your boss. To do that, first put yourself in your boss' shoes. What's important to your boss and to your organization's goals? If it is satisfaction, you can speak to that issue. If it's cost control, focus there. If it's compliance or safety...well, you get the idea. It's easy to take for granted that administrators "just know" what's going on in your department. In fact, it may be your job to paint a picture of the services and systems you envision. Tell the story of where you are now, where you want to go, and why and how it will benefit the organization.

Build a Team

As a leader, you need to build a team to make informatics work. Beyond your own department, get input from others who need to be on board with your automation plan, such as IT, Nursing, RDs, and others. And whether you are computerizing for the first time, or trying to get more power out of your system, remember to involve your staff. To gain the power of an informatics system, you need a mix of talents and insights, including everything from clinical nutrition to culinary talent. Depending on the size and organization of your department, you can involve those who play key roles. Even in a small operation, you'll want to be sure at least two people are fully up-to-speed on the system. Finally, at this stage, you will want to talk about sourcing or selecting a software vendor. Many people try to do that at the beginning, but that's too early. Your vision and organizational support should be in place first.

Think Big Picture

Understanding your short- and long-term goals at this point is very important, as these will direct you to the appropriate type of vendor solution. In the healthcare informatics market, there are not very many vendors who can provide a system that integrates information among diet office, clinical nutrition, production, and catering applications (and accommodate interfaces to your hospital information system, if your organization is a hospital). There are many very good single-task automation solutions available in the market today, e.g., PDAs that perform nutrient analysis, or recipe scaling software packages. However, these applications typically do not share information with each other and you'll have to manage these systems independently. If you implement multiple stand-alone applications, then you have to manage duplication of data, support, and overhead. This scenario is always less efficient and more costly. If you choose to move to a system that can support all functions in an integrated environment, the initial expenditures, training, and hardware for the first solution will be lost, and you'll have to start over. Keep the big picture in mind at all times during the evaluation process so you are in a position that allows for simple, economical expansion.

Make a Plan

Just as the menu is your blueprint for services, a project plan is vital to the success of an informatics project. The project plan should list as much detail as possible, listing every task needed to support your goal, with a timeline and the name of who will be responsible for completion. The plan will be assembled using your goals as the basis, and then enhanced by input from members of your team. As the leader, it is your responsibility to keep track of progress. Put on your marketing hat and communicate "The Plan"—its goals and its benefits—throughout the organization. This will generate interest and send notice to your team that the public is aware of your group's commitment. At staff meetings, reinforce the plan to a point in which your staff members don't just know it, they OWN it. As your team achieves assignments, celebrate milestones and provide recognition.

Make it Stick

As each automation process replaces a manual process, this is NOT a reason to sit back and relax. Instead, encourage your team to present suggestions on how to improve. This is a never-ending process. Get your team involved in identifying solutions to obstacles, as this will encourage their ownership of the new vision.

Keep Improving

As with any change and growth opportunity in your operation, your informatics system and your results-oriented objectives need to be monitored. One of the tools you can use is a process known as PDCA:

- Plan
- Do it
- Check results
- Adjust

An investment of your team's energy and resources into informatics is worth it, and it can be done. Whether you are a "first-timer" with software or dealing with an outdated system that needs to be re-vitalized, the tips above should help get you on your way. By applying your leadership skills, you can bring your department to a new level, building a positive reputation in your institution and your community. You can make your staff proud of what they do and how they do it, and yes, you really can be better than *good enough!* ■

Michael Babines is vice president of Vision Software Technologies Inc. He has a background in culinary arts as a Certified Executive Chef and three decades of experience in healthcare foodservice administration and computer systems. Today, he consults to healthcare foodservice clients throughout the world. He has posted informatics "toolkits" and more tips online at www.vstech.com/tool_kits.html. He may be reached at (724) 452-8794 or Michael@vstech.com