Maximizing productivity and performance in healthcare and other public services

Public service organizations face multiple pressures. Could a strategic approach to training and development involving the use of a new generation of learning support tools make a significant contribution to tackling current problems and addressing future issues?

The approach integrates learning and working, and uses a framework for managing information, knowledge, and best practice. With related learning tools, it supports the development, updating, and practice of healthcare professionals, and ensures adherence to relevant procedures, regulations, and standards. Implementation is manageable, affordable, and achievable.

Benefits include better engagement with patients, greater understanding, improved productivity, reduced costs, quicker responses, and faster dissemination of beneficial changes, less stress, higher standards of patient safety and care, and evidenced compliance. Other sectors have delivered substantial returns on investment. In healthcare, catching one patient before costly treatment is required could fund acquisition of some of the tools.

A knowledge-based approach

An integrated and systematic approach is to use learning and support tools to help healthcare professionals do difficult jobs and facilitate compliance and collaboration. PCs, laptops, palmtops, or apps on the latest generation of mobile phone can deliver knowledge-based tools to support professionals and knowledge workers. Animation and graphics can help users to understand complicated areas. Support is available at the point of practice, and in the case of healthcare at the place of patient need, even when practitioners are on call, at the site of an accident, or on the move.

The use of a knowledge management framework to assemble, manage, and update a knowledge base in various formats, which can include electronic databases, animations, graphics, and audio and visual material, can be a cost-effective way of bringing together the content required to maintain a portfolio of support tools.

The approach described here makes it easier for professionals to handle complex tasks and average performing practitioners can emulate the approaches of high performers.

Education and training

Knowledge-based learning and support tools are particularly well suited to the healthcare world. For example, they can sift a large repository of cases to aid diagnosis, and are easily updatable. They can support the initial training, development and preparation of new candidates for the healthcare professions, as one of their strengths is helping people to understand complex issues, conditions,
and requirements.

Direct access to a continually updated repository of knowledge and best practice ensures the exposure of trainees to current thinking. It provides early exposure to a way of working that can ensure they learn and remain up to date throughout their careers, while at the same time generating evidence of their commitment to continuing professional development (CPD).

**Induction and newly qualified practitioners**

A support tool can be particularly helpful to newly qualified doctors. Better support for general practitioners could also help to achieve greater engagement in commissioning and a more appropriate balance between primary and secondary care. Increased speed of referral in doctors' surgeries can enable more patients to be seen.

**Continuing professional development**

In the CPD arena, the use of knowledge-based tools to support communities of healthcare professionals is particularly cost-effective when they are operating in environments that are inherently complex and fields that are frequently changing.

Integrating learning and practice so that support is provided as, when and where required is preferable from a user perspective, particularly when it is provided in such a way as to help understanding, raise standards of practice and directly benefit patients. Support tools can also be used with patients, sharing what is learned, and involving them in their own treatment and healthcare.

**Supporting and monitoring professional practice**

Each healthcare professional may have a different requirement, and people are increasingly specializing in particular areas of practice. It is relatively straightforward to build support for distinct professional communities into regularly updated tools for assessing individual patients, selecting preferred courses of action, and generating any bespoke documentation that may be required. Built-in checks can ensure requests, reports and other documentation comply with regulatory and other requirements.

Many doctors and other healthcare professionals suffer from information overload when what they need is specific help and support that directly relates to individual conditions and the problems of particular patients. Busy practitioners appreciate receiving what they need in a format that is easy to use and understand. A one-off briefing is no substitute for ongoing day-to-day support. Healthcare professionals are more likely to use a particular source of information if they are confident that it will be relevant and up to date. The use of support tools makes it easier for healthcare organizations and the professional bodies concerned to identify areas in which people require assistance and avoid devoting effort to developing services that are unappreciated or uneconomic.

**Safeguarding and improving patient safety**

Patient safety is a primary requirement. Clinical and other risks have to be managed and mitigated. In clinical settings, practitioners experience contending pressures, distractions and changes of priority as emergencies arise. Culture and hierarchy can lead some to defer to others, even when they feel that a proposed course of action may not be in strict accordance with a rule or procedure. Multiple handovers in frenetic emergency room, accident, or theatre situations can also result in misunderstandings.
Risk levels could be reduced significantly by the use of diagnostic and treatment learning and support tools that incorporate checks to prevent undesirable situations from occurring. Blockers could be used to prevent certain courses of action, such as prescribing incompatible drugs, with windows opening on-screen to explain the reason and suggest safer alternatives.

**Ensuring high standards of practice and care**

The continuing "winning companies; winning people" research programme has found that among professionals there are usually a relatively small number of superstars and a long tail of adequate performers. Tools that capture the approaches of high performers and enable others to learn from them and emulate how they diagnose and treat conditions would raise standards.

**Ensuring optimum clinical pathways**

Support tools can suggest appropriate clinical pathways, giving practitioners quick access to continually updated information and helping them to prepare a cost-effective treatment plan. An appropriate and easy-to-use support framework can bring together the information, tools, evidence and procedures healthcare professionals need to investigate, understand, and treat or control a medical condition.

A learning and support tool is particularly useful for pathways that are either used infrequently or which change frequently. Clinical pathways toolkits aim to provide everything a practitioner needs to understand and treat a medical condition. With a portable device such as a laptop, help is available on-demand.

**Achieving better outcomes for and with patients**

Medical learning and support tools can help practitioners categorize and work out best treatment methods. Algorithms accompanied by photographs can be used to assess a patient's condition. For example, is there any black, brown or necrotic tissue present in a wound? Images could also be used to categorize wound tissue types. Lists of appropriate dressings could be provided.

**Increasing healthcare and public service productivity**

Healthcare productivity would benefit from specific tools to increase performance. Most support tools deliver multiple benefits for a cost that can be less than that saved by preventing just one patient from suffering a stroke. The benefits of a clinical pathway tool of the type described above include:

- Right referral to the right place at the right time
- Potentially decreasing referral rates
- Improved clinical governance as patients end up on the right pathway and ultimately in the best place for secondary care.

**Reducing workplace stress**

Improving the health and wellbeing of NHS staff could result in savings of £500 million per annum. Ensuring the earlier diagnosis of conditions, better prevention, and more appropriate referral can reduce the pressure on hospital environments where stress levels in certain situations can be intense.

Compliance with procedures, better routing and the elimination of errors and exceptions, can also reduce stress. Healthcare managers need to ensure that staff,
and particularly those in the front line, receive appropriate support.

Implementation issues

Clinician involvement in the planning and delivery of change within a health system is vital if successful implementation of change is to occur. Healthcare managers tend to cite the complex and fragmented nature of the healthcare system as reasons why changes are difficult to implement. However, industry experience suggests the take up of the suggested approach could be relatively quick.

Transforming lives

The systematic use of support tools could address many problems in healthcare and other public services. Experience elsewhere suggests significant reductions in healthcare costs could be achieved without compromising patient safety, standards of care, and the patient experience. Individual tools are affordable for hospitals, consortia of doctors' practices and other care providers. Unit costs fall rapidly with larger communities as initial set up costs are spread over a greater number of users.

Support tools can enable assessment and treatment activities to be done quicker and more effectively at a lower cost, while also enhancing patient safety and care. This means that the healthcare system can be transformed in a way that makes it much easier for healthcare professionals to work with each other and patients – that is the key to people living longer and living well.

November 2010.

This is a shortened version of “Transforming productivity and performance in healthcare and other public services: how training and development could make a more strategic contribution”, which originally appeared in Industrial and Commercial Training, Volume 42, Number 5, 2010.

The author is Colin Coulson-Thomas.