



# eHealth: A solution to managing the traffic and noise in home care

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**H**ome care organizations know that the challenges of a highly mobile workforce and a manual, paper-based environment can often lead to congestion, bottlenecks, slowdowns, and all-out traffic jams. At the same time, we are challenged to optimize our talent, achieve operational efficiencies and improve health care practices and client care.

Several years ago, Saint Elizabeth Health Care (SEHC) – an innovative home and community-based health care organization - set out on a journey to explore new approaches to the delivery of home care services, with the intent to create a highly efficient workforce, free from obstructions to care delivery. Against the backdrop of emerging consumerism and advances in ICTs, SEHC anticipated that the power of information would create an environment for individuals to focus on the management of health conditions at home.

Today, SEHC is seeing great positive results through the automation of business activities, such as travel reimbursement using GPS technology; BlackBerry's for multiple modes of communication; visit validation using a telephony solution; anytime access to service information through a web portal; clinical documentation using our SMART chart tablet technology; and @YourSide Colleague®, our learning management solution. These e-health initiatives are being evaluated by end-users in a variety of settings across Ontario.

Through experience and lessons learned, our organization has created a viable roadmap to help our staff successfully navigate and manage the traffic and noise in home care, clearing the way for increased time and focus on client care.

## 1. Imagine the future

As e-business initiatives were fuelling the reinvention of other industries – think banking, retail and telecommunications – SEHC picked up on the key themes of a knowledge-driven, technology-enabled environment, and imagined a future where mobile workers could dedicate their time

to caring for clients, free from the noise caused by the challenge of working in a mobile environment. The organization spent considerable time studying workload variables, particularly in the areas of administrative activities, access to information, knowledge creation and transfer. All of this information helped us to shape our philosophy on technology, and as an organization, SEHC began to proactively transform itself before the market explicitly demanded it.

## 2. Be flexible and tolerate ambiguity

Innovation is not, nor should it be, a linear process. When navigating through uncharted territory, flexibility is imperative as you are constantly assessing and adjusting your expectations and route as you move forward. A strong philosophy will help guide you. Initially, we focused our attention on activities that could be automated to improve access to information, thereby providing a smoother ride for mobile workers. Instead of waiting for a perfect solution, we jumped right in, working closely with end users to find a multitude of solutions to manage bumps in the road! While this pace and type of risk-taking contradicts the typical approach within the health care environment, it is strategically necessary to achieve timely and transformative change. If failures occur, exit quickly but intelligently, then learn from it and move on.

## 3. Grow as you go

The cycle for implementing applications is a process of continual evolution. With just enough information, a product is selected and then pushed out for testing, experimentation and feedback on user acceptance. Initially, pilot projects are created to provide a 'safe' testing ground before engaging other employees. With any innovation, the challenge in evaluating its effectiveness is dependent on the realization of value it provides. Rapid implementation can impact the timeliness

of information that is available for evaluation. Furthermore, the innovation often represents a 'quantum leap' from what currently exists, so the context in which you are undertaking the evaluation is constantly changing. Therefore, it stands that you need an innovative performance measurement system and psychological marketing strategy for innovation in e-health!

#### 4. Consider non-traditional forms of ROI

A review of the literature, coupled with feedback from a variety of stakeholders, has helped us to identify the "vital few" critical measures in the areas of organizational outcomes, provider outcomes, and system outcomes. A strict 'money in, money out' mentality can be very limiting in health care. Consider creating a viable business model that changes current structures, business activities and costs, leading to system improvements, enhancements to the work environment and the optimization of health human resources. While it may be difficult to see the value initially, staying the course can be a strategic decision that benefits not only the organization, but the entire system.

#### 5. Instill a culture of innovation

It seems that the process for implementing e-health solutions more closely follows a spiral of learning than a step-wise plan. By instilling a culture of innovation throughout an organization, you can create the necessary energy and environment for learning to take place, and also to replicate. When everyone is engaged in the creation and sharing of ideas, you inspire them to imagine the future... and so the cycle continues.

With a clear roadmap, you can effectively bring the traffic light mentality to e-health in order to determine which ideas are green – good to go; amber – proceed with caution; and red – put on the brakes. And like any other adventure, it always helps to enjoy the ride!

#### About the author:

Shirlee Sharkey is President and CEO of Saint Elizabeth Health Care, a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization that shares its talent and wisdom nationally and internationally in the areas of direct care and service, consultation, and education and e-learning. With nearly a century of experience and a dynamic talent team of 3,700, SEHC delivers three million home care visits annually and has been recognized as both one of the Best Employers and Best Workplaces in Canada. For more information, visit [saintelizabeth.com](http://saintelizabeth.com).



Saint Elizabeth Health Care Nurse Janet Crozier uses a BlackBerry to securely communicate with other members of the health care team while providing home care to 3-year old Edison, who has leukemia.