

Developing a Charter for a Collaborative Requirements Project

One of a series of case studies on strategic application and management of health information systems.

Public health laboratories (PHLs) operate as the first line of defense to protect the American people against diseases and other health hazards. But with their funding limited or shrinking over the years, PHLs are often unable to take advantage of recent advances in information technology. As new disease outbreaks and bioterrorism threats increase, many laboratories are still using paper-based tracking and surveillance methods along with outmoded computers, spreadsheet programs, and basic database software that are not automated or networked.

This was the challenging environment facing the Public Health Informatics Institute (the Institute) and the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL) in September 2002 when the organizations formed a collaboration to develop requirements for their laboratory information management systems (LIMS). The impetus for tackling this challenge had evolved in part from new bioterrorism preparedness mandates.

Challenge

The initial challenge for the Institute and APHL was simply figuring out how to start. Getting the disparate stakeholders together to reach

consensus on how to proceed had to be addressed before delving into drafting the requirements.

A number of specific circumstances made this project's startup complex:

- This would mark the first time that the Institute and APHL were teaming up on a project.
- This would be the first time that requirements were created collaboratively by and for PHLs.
- The Institute, in its role as project manager, would have to address the risks associated with participants being widely dispersed throughout the country and unable to meet in person on a regular basis.
- Defining system requirements that meet common needs for all laboratories would be the project's critical driver, yet no two public health laboratories are alike.

Solution

The first action of the collaboration was to sign a clear and detailed project charter based on input—and consensus—from stakeholders. This allowed all participants to be heard and to provide valuable, real-world context for their mutual goal: to draft a set of LIMS requirements that would serve all public health laboratories, regardless of size or structure.

The Institute, APHL, and stakeholders from the participating laboratories followed best practices for development of information systems. They started by developing a charter, a document endorsed by all parties in which they agree to the project's overarching structure: operating principles, governance, roles and responsibilities, decision-making process, and communications plan. In essence, the charter ensures that stakeholders are represented and that participants are “on the same page” about how the project will be managed for the benefit of all involved.^{1, 2}

In addition to gaining agreement on the project's structure, the charter also documents the project scope, its goals and projected outcomes, and related project activities. While defining tasks and goals, the charter also details aspects that are out of scope.

The LIMS requirements project charter³ included:

- **Statement of the project, its purpose, and major deliverables.** Information was stated clearly and concisely in complete sentences.
- **Governance plan and decision matrix (or similar).** Explained who would make decisions, how and when decisions would be made, and major project milestones

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that would trigger the decision process.

- **Detailed project plan.** Indicated to all stakeholders how the project would unfold and be managed.
- **Stakeholder analysis.** Described everyone who is touched by, involved in, an anticipated user of, or needed to make the system function.
- **Communications plan and strategy.** The who, what, when, and why of informing stakeholders.
- **Risk assessment and mitigation plan.** Formalized strategies and methodologies to ensure smooth communications, processes, accountability, resource allocations, and risk avoidance and mitigation.

At the LIMS project's official launch—called the “kickoff” meeting—participants reviewed the terms of the charter and approved them. The importance of adhering to the charter was emphasized, and participants absorbed its principles so well that, during the project, the document served as a primary reference.

At the kickoff meeting, the Institute also emphasized that having an engaged executive sponsor is an ideal practice. In this case, the executive directors of APHL and the Institute approved and signed the charter.

Impact

Within six months, using the guidance of the project charter, participants from the Institute, APHL, and 16 public health laboratories delivered their first draft of LIMS

requirements. The document marked a historic first in the arena of public health laboratories. Not only had participants agreed with the assumption that diverse PHLs could agree on standardized information systems requirements, they moved forward with creating and agreeing on the first comprehensive set. And overarching the project's success was a well-designed charter approved by all.

Benefits of creating a charter for the LIMS requirements project included:

- Helping formalize the partnership between the Institute and APHL.
- Serving as a reference to guide the LIMS requirements project to the desired outcomes.
- Involving LIMS users and other interested parties from the project's inception through final outcomes.
- Ensuring the PHL participants understood what they were agreeing to be involved in.
- Giving APHL, its members, and all stakeholders the confidence that the Institute would professionally manage the project with them.
- Providing a foundation of understanding upon which the project partners could build partnerships and activities.

Conclusion

The success of the LIMS requirements project is directly related to the strong start established by the project charter created at the outset. With the input and buy-in of all participants, the charter ensured that everyone involved was “on the

same page.” The charter set the course, taking the guesswork out of the question: “What exactly are we trying to accomplish?”

The charter also helped formalize the partner relationships among the Institute, APHL, and the participating laboratories while reflecting the interests, concerns, and desires of all stakeholders. The charter set the tone for a cooperative project while providing ample reference material for guidance, dispute resolution, and future endeavors.

Notes

¹ All Kids Count (2003). *Integration of Newborn Screening and Genetic Service Systems with Other Maternal & Child Health Systems: A Sourcebook for Planning and Development*. Decatur, GA: Public Health Informatics Institute. www.phii.org/Files/HRSAsourcebook.pdf

² Martin, P and K. Tate (1997). *Project Management Memory Jogger: A Pocket Guide for Project Teams*. Salem, NH: GOAL/QPC. www.goalqpc.com

³ Public Health Informatics Institute and Association of Public Health Laboratories (2002). *Project Charter: A Public Health Laboratory Collaborative for Laboratory Information Management Systems*. Decatur, GA: Public Health Informatics Institute. <http://www.phii.org/cr-lab.html>



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