Getting everyone on the same page

By David F. Morill
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"Left hand, meet the right hand" is a critical mantra for any successful business. It's also an apt description of the benefits that come from Chon Abraham's particular expertise.

An assistant professor of information systems in the Mason School's Operations and Information Systems department, Abraham studies what technology can do for business. She's especially interested in how information technology can create clear lines of communications and provide all stakeholders with access to the same data.

"Technology is by and large a communication tool," says Abraham. "Good technology applied badly doesn't do anyone any good, so I look at the steps needed to move information from Point A to Point B in a business context."

In the healthcare field, for instance, Abraham cites poor informatics as a leading cause of medical error. Despite the high-tech nature of medical care itself, there's still a lot of low-tech data-entry behind it that leads to inefficiency and misinterpretation.

"Until recently, information was largely piecemeal and often disparate – notes scribbled on pieces of paper," Abraham says. "Because healthcare professionals require a comprehensive view to properly diagnose patients, we need to identify linkages among various information streams and connect them through technology."

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Abraham has spent the last three years doing exactly that, looking at large-scale implementations of electronic medical records and enterprise-wide patient data. She talks with different stakeholders, sees what other similar organizations are doing, makes assessments, and helps provide insight for best practices. Better use of technology will set a standard for how data is recorded, effectively putting all practitioners on the same page.

Working with Sentara Healthcare, for instance, Abraham researched the 18 different workflow processes involved in the reengineering project for eCare, a high-tech program that integrates information environments. She also spent eight months in Japan as a Fulbright Scholar, gaining valuable insight comparing and contrasting that country's healthcare information technology needs with those of the U.S.

Abraham gets a sense of satisfaction when information technology is used well, and she's seeing improvements all the time. Benefits of healthcare informatics include streamlined processes; more efficient use of doctors' and nurses' time; improved home healthcare for aging populations; better capturing of information and analytics; and increased accountability.

And then there's the business perspective. "It costs a lot to implement better communications, but in the long run it reduces cost for consumers and increases revenue," Abraham explains. "Like any organization, hospitals make more money by being more efficient."

It's a given that Abraham shares this perspective in the classroom with her students, all of whom are eager to witness real-world, practical cases in action. She has even taught a healthcare seminar, ideal for the many pre-med and business students at the College.

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"What's more practical than healthcare?" Abraham asks. "Everyone has to see a doctor sometime, and they want the best care possible. They don't want it error-prone; they want it informated."

Thanks to more and more left hands knowing what right hands are doing, and vise-versa, that wish is coming true.