

The Top Ten Document Control Tips for Hospitals

SoftTech Health offers expertise to reduce P&P management headaches

Policy and Procedure management may not be sexy in healthcare IT these days, what with single sign-on, EHRs, interoperability, and other software trends of the moment. However, every department in the hospital faces the same, seemingly intractable challenges when it comes to managing their mountains of mandatory P&Ps. Regulatory demands over controlling these documents ends up costing a significant part of healthcare resources.

SoftTech Health, a developer of P&P document management software, has gathered much expertise about overcoming these challenges in the healthcare environment. These tips are an outgrowth of their hands-on experiences in helping healthcare organizations to streamline and improve control over these critical documents.

1. If the organization wants to use software to help manage P&Ps, seek out a purpose-built document management solution that's really intended for that purpose. Many "document management" solutions are better described as document imaging solutions, for getting paper files scanned into digital form. But for SOP management, an organization needs specific functions that help control, revise, approve, and archive the documents – so look for a P&P management tool instead.
2. Multi-site organizations should look to share and standardize P&Ps to reduce the work of managing them. Too many hospitals with multiple sites are spending time managing SOPs and policies separately at each site. Instead, take advantage of intranet-style solutions, like those that SoftTech Health offers, that can connect all of the organization's sites with an online network – so that all are sharing the same set of P&Ps.
3. Assess the staff's readiness to give up their old Policy Manual binders, and address it head-on. Most healthcare workers know that paper binders are inherently inefficient and difficult to control – but managers shouldn't proceed full steam ahead on that assumption. Gather some input from staff about transitioning to online, computerized Document Management methods. If managers experience severe pushback from staff, seek the assistance of a software vendor with experience in managing this change. SoftTech Health's expertise in the healthcare environment has proven invaluable for many hospitals in this regard.
4. Analyze how the hospital is handling the full P&P control lifecycle now, to provide a shared understanding of where improvements could be made. Compare existing P&P processes to a typical document control flowchart, like that provided by CLSI, and make sure that all stakeholders fully understand every step in the process. Often, staff only see their own contribution to P&P management – but educating them on the full document lifecycle enables buy-in for improvements like purpose-built P&P software.
5. If the organization decides to use a software package to automate the P&P approval workflow, make sure it is as easy for approvers to use as the old processes for approvals. Many hospitals and labs are still circulating document revisions to their managers by paper, or by email. These manual processes take too long, but they are easy for busy managers to understand. Software that's well-designed, such as the SoftTech Health DM system, will ensure that managers can use a simple interface that requires as few steps as possible to sign-off on documents.
6. Use automated online Notifications to make "Read & Signs" painless and keep them tracked and organized with minimal effort. Instead of using slips of paper which must be filed and organized, software can enable automated escalation and tracking of Read & Signs.

7. Make it easy for staff to quickly see what's new about each revised SOP, with color coding. While it's prohibitive to do this with printed P&Ps, it's simple and cost-effective with documents viewed via DM software: simply use MS Word or other word processing software to highlight the changed sections in a contrast color. As long as the DM software integrates with MS Word, as does SoftTech Health's DMS, staff will be able to see those highlights and know immediately what's been changed.
8. Automated, recurring online notifications can help reduce that chronic P&P management problem: documents that are out-of-date and therefore do not comply with regulations. Healthcare accreditation agencies expect that P&Ps are reviewed on a regular basis, and revised if necessary. Hospitals can use software such as the SoftTech Health DM system to set up regular, pre-timed notifications to the right people at the right time, reminding them to make sure their documents are regularly reviewed.
9. Understand the limitations of shared network drives as a means for P&P management. See also Tip #4: once staff understand the full document lifecycle, it becomes clear that making documents available on a shared network drive is only a partial solution. While it does represent a move away from cumbersome paper binders, shared drives do not help with the challenges of performing regular reviews getting revisions properly approved, and maintaining secure version control. It's important to realize that the work of document management has not stopped with transfer of the organization's P&Ps onto a shared drive.
10. Seek an online archiving function that handles the last step in the document lifecycle – archiving out-of-date versions – without human intervention. If document revisions are automatically stored in software-maintained archives, the organization reduces the risk of P&Ps going missing or inadvertently being tampered with.

About SoftTech Health

Software developer SoftTech Health has helped thousands of healthcare employees to manage hundreds of thousands of policies, procedures, and other critical documents. Specializing in software specifically for clinical environments, SoftTech Health has deployed its Document Management and Quality Management solutions to help hospitals all across North America. SoftTech Health has been chosen by prestigious healthcare organizations such as Mayo Health/Fransiscan Skemp, Malcolm Baldrige award-winner Baptist Health, and Magnet hospital Children's Hospital of LA.

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