

# Governing in the Digital Age

As the need for IT acumen grows, boards have a variety of options for filling that knowledge gap

By James W. Gauss

Most boards I know were built by recruiting business leaders, physicians and clergy, and it's important to have broad community representation among trustees. Increasingly, however, boards are recruiting new members by using a skills-based approach aligned with the organization's strategic needs, including the need for information technology expertise. This is where "digital directors" come in.

Health care boards need two types of digital expertise. The first is obvious: knowledge of and skills in health information technology and informatics. Trustees must understand electronic health records, meaningful use requirements, data analysis and information systems integration. IT is the tool that will enable the quality, efficiency and cost savings that hospitals and systems need. It also unlocks the potential of personalized medicine and a more patient-centric industry.

The second type of expertise needed is a keen understanding of IT in general and how it energizes every enterprise within our society. In all industries, IT is fueling advances in finance, human resources, marketing, quality, compliance, operations and strategy.

There's no question that tomorrow's great organizations will be those that leverage IT most successfully.

## Smart Sources

Improving the board's IT understanding requires members who innately get the digital age. For example, Mayo Clinic trustee Michael Powell is president and chief executive of the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, former chair of the Federal Communications Commission, and a proponent of expanding digital access and applications. His understanding of communication trends, applications, regulations and cybersecurity will be particularly helpful as the use of telehealth expands and providers seek to better understand consumer needs and preferences.

On a smaller scale, boards can recruit trustees from their local IT community. A few places to look include:

- **Other hospitals, health systems and medical centers.** The leading IT people in the industry are likely to be on other boards and may be willing to serve an additional post.
- **IT-related associations and standards-setting bodies.** Professionals with ties to HIMSS and the American

Health Information Management Association may be ideal trustees, as well as those in such cross-industry groups as the Association of Information Technology Professionals and CompTIA.

- **Solution providers and high-tech firms.** These companies can be fertile ground for recruiting, as long as conflicts of interest are addressed for employees of vendor partners.

## Younger Experts

Getting digital often means getting younger. Professionals younger than 40 tend to have an intuitive knowledge of technology and how it can be leveraged. Some boards see risk in recruiting younger members out of concern that these individuals may lack managerial experience or may have unrealistic expectations about what trustees can and should do. But these concerns should be tempered by the fact that younger members, if their hearts are in the right place, will make it a point to learn the ropes as quickly as possible. Younger professionals may not fit the mold of former trustees, and it may be time for the mold to be recast.

While every trustee does not need to be an IT expert, bringing on new members may require boards to remove veterans to make room. This is a sensitive situation. In these instances, board audits, skills assessments, succession planning and planned turnover can bear fruit. Boards that set term limits create an environment in which new, IT-savvy blood can be brought in as members retire or serve out their terms.

## Prepared for Discussion

Many boards believe that health care governance is becoming extremely challenging, and IT is a major contributor to that complexity. Rather, the board as a whole should move toward a place where members can talk about the right things and ask the right questions for this digital age. **T**



Center Voices comes from the American Hospital Association's Center for Healthcare Governance.



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