

Towards a Framework for Realising the Benefits of eHealth in South Africa

The South African national eHealth strategy (2012/2013–2016/2017) includes a strategic priority focused on realisation of benefits. The strategy states that “[s]pecific actions are required to ensure that eHealth implementations deliver on their promise and that anticipated benefits are realised for all stakeholders.”¹

The specific activity highlighted within this priority was the development of “...a benefits realisation plan which specifies health outcome benefits expected at local level for all eHealth interventions.” Although this was never completed, it would be an effective starting place to understand the benefits of eHealth. Once benefits have been shown clearly, generating business cases and obtaining appropriate funding and support for projects become easier.

This document summarises an eHealth benefits realisation framework toolkit, which consists of technical briefs and a set of examples. The toolkit provides the following information:

- How to map strategic objectives to benefits and information and communications technology (ICT) enablers
- How to collate and prioritise identified benefits
- How to identify to whom to assign responsibilities
- How to measure the benefits

The toolkit also contains a benefit profile template, along with several sample benefit profiles, that could be used to create a comprehensive list of benefits.

The full contents of the eHealth benefits realisation framework toolkit are described briefly below.

South African eHealth Benefits Realisation—Mapping Strategic Objectives to Benefits and ICT Enablers

This document analyses the strategic objectives of the National Department of Health and the benefits they aim to deliver through the lens of eHealth. Each benefit has been assessed to identify how ICTs can be used as tools to enable the realisation of the benefit, providing a starting point to identify potential eHealth benefits.

A Method for Collating and Prioritising Potential eHealth Benefits in South Africa

This technical brief outlines a method for collating eHealth-related benefits in benefit profiles. The brief also gives an example of how specific benefits can be assessed by groups and prioritised.

Assigning Responsibilities for eHealth Benefits Realisation in the South African Context

This document discusses the need to assign responsibilities for benefits realisation to appropriate managers and staff. Different potential roles are highlighted, and a method for assigning ownership and realisation of the benefit is described.

Baselining, Measuring, and Reviewing eHealth-Related Benefits in South Africa

This technical brief describes several important considerations relating to the measurement of benefits. Because it is important to consider how benefits will be measured, appropriate indicators need to be identified and an effective plan to baseline and measure them is essential.

¹ South Africa National Department of Health. (2012). eHealth Strategy South Africa 2012–2016. Retrieved from http://www.doh.gov.za/docs/stratdocs/2012/eHealth_Strategy_South_Africa_2012-2016.pdf

Benefit Profile Template

This comprehensive benefit profile template contains the key fields emphasised in the briefs. This template can be used to collate information and review the benefits on a regular basis.

Sample Benefit Profiles

Seven sample benefit profiles are provided:

- EH001: Primary healthcare services made more accessible and available within the local community
- EH002: Reduced costs of litigation through improved record keeping
- EH003: More efficient availability of medication and fewer stockouts
- EH004: Improved disease surveillance
- EH005: Improved general health and health education of young people
- EH006: Improved emergency medical services (EMS) available to the public
- EH007: Improved continuum of care for patients, with better health decisions based on electronic health records

Some common threads were identified during the development of these benefit profiles. For example, broadband connectivity is required to properly realise many of the benefits. In addition, there are common risks with respect to staff capacity and stakeholder buy-in.

There are also some grey areas in these examples. This is because some information can only be approximated in the initial draft. Plans relating to the possible interventions and measurements are based on many assumptions. These will need further assessment and review, especially with respect to costs, additional indicators, and associated research.

Existing projects, such as the national electronic Primary Healthcare (ePHC) project and the Stock Visibility System (SVS), show that progress is already being made to realise some benefits. It should be noted that the provided benefit profile samples are not an exhaustive set. It is also important to consider that as technologies evolve and mature, there may be other ICT enablers that have not yet been identified. Regular review will be necessary to seize new opportunities and identify how these influence existing benefit realisation plans.

Should the benefits realisation approach outlined in the toolkit be followed through, eHealth may well prove to be an effective tool to help combat South Africa's health challenges.

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