By Bill Bott

Modernization Is Desperately Needed …
But It's Not Enough

Most of our child welfare agencies are working hard to modernize their Child Welfare Information Systems (CWIS) in an effort to give our workforce the most advanced tools available. There have been tremendous leaps in mobility, data mining, artificial intelligence, and connectivity that make older systems a true limitation to our shared mission of keeping kids safe. While new technology can help us with everything from tracking work to enhancing our safety models, by itself it's not enough.

Let's look at what technology does really well. First, it helps us keep track all of the tasks and deadlines associated with our work. While we complain about the flood of reminders and approaching deadlines, can you imagine tracking all of that on paper? Second, technology automates a portion of our work by helping us navigate documentation, autofill forms, and provide instant access to information. Modern systems do all of these actions much better than systems developed even ten years ago. Ten years from now, it may be even better as we seem to be on the verge of evolution where our systems will soon help us to make decisions by providing an automated set of eyes and super-computing brain on the human information we gather. There is no doubt that technology does a lot of good things.

By itself, an investment in information technology will no doubt yield a return, but to truly see radical improvement throughout our department, we also have to focus on the things that technology misses; mainly, the time in between the work. Take, for example, an abuse allegation that takes around 22 hours of work to investigate and we try to get to a safety decision within 30–45 days. Technology focuses on automating the 22 hours and tracking that we meet the deadline, which is only about 3 percent of the total time. Even if the best systems can cut our work in half to 11 hours—a 50 percent improvement in the "work," we get less than a 10 percent overall improvement. Until we address why 22 hours of work takes 30–45 days, we only see moderate improvements for our large technology investments.

So What Can We Do to Get Radical?

The answer lies in the flow of the work more than the work itself.

When work is not properly flowing, we actually create more work for ourselves, like small penalties that quickly add up. Think of the caseworker who has been working to make a reunification decision for some time. Each month there are supervised visits, contacts, reassessments, staffing, court reports, and documentation that need to be done. If work fails to flow, it has the potential to add another month to the decision-making process. What causes the disruption in flow? It could be a waitlist for a service the parent must attend, or an inability to get a quick court date, or perhaps this month there were a series of placement disruptions and small emergencies that

robbed us of the time to dedicate to this particular case. Work can stall for any number of reasons—some we can't control and some we can—but each adds a penalty of another month of work for a family that needs a decision today.

To control flow we need to see the work, limit the times a family is waiting on us, and build in safeguards to assure no case is ever left on the back burner. These are process improvements driven by human interaction— supervisors and case managers working together to agree on the path to a decision and making sure our tasks are constantly moving the family toward that goal. Where technology monitors deadlines, supervisors monitor if we're doing the right work at the right time.

In assessment, controlling flow means closing out a report as close to the investigative work as possible. If we make our safety decision in the first few days, we need to build a process to get our staffing and documentation done in that same period. When we cannot, we end up racking up so many penalty minutes that work piles up, and soon we're not managing flow, we're managing deadlines by taking workers out of rotation so they can complete paperwork.

If you're watching your time to safety decision creep up, or if you have kids in care longer and more children in care, your problem is not related to technology, but rather to capacity and workflow. Technology alone will not be enough, but when it is partnered with true process improvement to improve workflow, we can see five-day safety decisions, double-digit drops in time in care, and assure our workforce has the time to work with the children who need them most. ▪

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