

## **Making healthcare operations leaner with Six Sigma**

When it comes to improving business processes, few concepts seem to attract as much attention as Six Sigma. Despite its development being commonly accredited to electronics giant Motorola, both the original ideology and its 'Lean' alternative have grown in prominence to be used in a variety of sectors.

One of the most notable areas to make use of the system is the healthcare sector, where it is regularly used as a means for companies and authorities to drive down their costs while simultaneously ensuring that their procedures operate in the most efficient manner possible. This can come from a range of techniques, including the likes of defined cost-cutting tasks, as well as softer methodologies based on a simple change in attitude like cultural adaptation and training.

The potential benefits of implementing a Lean Six Sigma in a healthcare setting were recently highlighted by awards wins from continuous process and quality management consultancy firm Novaces. The company has around two decades of expertise in the area and offers business transformation support services based around the concept through its healthcare-focussed SystemCPI programme, which is designed to improve processes in relation to cost controls, patient and visitor safety, and core quality indicators.

It has made use of the system in its work with Navy Medicine, which has proved to be a big success for the firm with the partnership allowing both parties to savour two major award wins. Novaces is contracted to supply Lean Six Sigma support and project mentoring to Navy Medicine's four major Echelon III Regional Commands, which are based in areas including Virginia, California and Maryland.

One of the projects focused on timely coding completion of outpatient records for the organisation. As well as cutting defective outpatient records by 50 per cent, the initiative led to an 89 per cent reduction in coding errors and is estimated to have recaptured \$1.2 million (£813,144) in non-value added work hours. A second scheme was based around medical screenings of US reservists, which resulted in a financial benefit of around \$4 million.

In recognition of the positive impact that the initiatives have had, Novaces was given awards from the Department of the Navy at the 2010 Continuous Process Improvement (CPI) Advanced Training and Development Workshop. The event was attended by 500 Navy CPI leaders and practitioners and the firm competed with 60 other schemes in each of the categories.

Dan Chauncey, director of deployment services for Novaces, said: "It is very rewarding to partner with Navy Medicine in their efforts to improve efficiency as well as improve the care delivered to the nation's sailors, marines, and their families.

"These awards are two indicators of how serious they are taking this endeavour and we are seeing equal improvements across the enterprise."

He added that the Lean Six Sigma practices that the organisation has focused on with its Navy partners would also be as applicable to civilian and other government bodies as they are in their current setting.

The award wins for Novace and Navy Medicine have shed a strong positive light on both the benefits of implementing a Lean Six Sigma strategy into a healthcare organisation, as well as how such a policy can impact on the esteem in which bodies can be regarded by their peers.

Of course, the figures quoted make arguably the biggest point of all in relation to this issue – that Lean Six Sigma can generate serious savings while also boosting the efficiency and performance of an organisation. Such advantages are likely to play a key role in ensuring the concept remains a key issue for many companies in the healthcare sector and beyond.

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