



## Optimize Your Billing System: Making Your Changes

By Larry Houghton

*Part Two of a three-part series*

**Target practice is a mainstay** for all military weapons training. On the range nobody can shoot until they hear, *Ready! Aim! Fire!* These same commands apply to a billing system optimization project; the target is the assessment. So *Ready! Aim! Fire!* to make the right changes to make your billing system hum.

### **Ready!**

Fail to plan. Plan to fail. Worth repeating. Ready yourself by creating a plan to make modifications in your system that will enhance efficiency.

Separating the task lists into Things to Correct and Things to Automate is a good way to organize everything. Your plan can be as detailed as you want, should list everything you want to change and provide users of the plan with a consistent approach to the review and resolution of each item. Tasks should indicate documentation needs based on organizational policies and procedures regarding change control.

Current day-to-day issues and project work must also be factored into the plan. You are not going to stop work on day-to-day issue resolution; however, your project work will be affected. The bottom line is that some projects may get pushed out, but everything can still get done as you optimize your billing system.

If your organization does not have a template for documenting changes made in your system, now is a good time to create one. Created effectively, this documentation can be used for multiple purposes. Your template should detail all of the changes made, include before and after screen shots and/or descriptions of changes and, with some basic testing scenarios, provide a starting point for testing.

### **Aim!**

Now you are ready to take each issue in your plan and review required changes. This demands critical thinking. Many times those reviewing the current situation are the same people who set it up, and nobody wants to admit being wrong. So the tendency may be to justify the current configuration. Avoid that type of decision-making at all costs. Employ a new set of eyes to look at the issues.

This entire process provides a learning opportunity for everyone involved. If you are an IT manager, don't be afraid to use this stage of the process as a training opportunity for your entire department. In many cases your changes will drive how everything works. This is an opportunity for a less seasoned analyst to learn something new while working with a senior staffer.

### **Fire!**

You know what needs to be changed and how it needs to be changed. *Now do it!* There are a lot of approaches you can for each change. Some are good and some are not so good. Too many times changes are made directly into a production environment without sufficient testing. That is an accident waiting to happen. Always make changes to the system in a Test environment before even considering a move to a Live environment. This is a hard and fast rule. The Test environment allows you to test every conceivable scenario without affecting your regular business.

You must test a sufficient number of scenarios for each change you make. The number will generally correspond to the complexity of the change made. Testing should be a three-step process.

1. Unit Test. The programmer/developer/analyst tests his or her own change to ensure that it works as expected and does not generate any system errors.

2. System Test. The analyst or user tests the change to ensure that it works as expected using controlled scenarios.
3. Integration Test. The user tests the change to ensure that it works as expected with all parts of the system that use and/or interact with the feature being changed.

For the smaller, straightforward changes you'll be fine with these three forms of testing.

### Simulation Testing

For more complex modifications, you may want to run some simulation testing to ensure that the change produces the expected results using real scenarios drawn from the Live environment.

Also known as parallel testing, simulation testing scenarios are created by replicating in the Test environment work already performed in the production environment. When the work is replicated in the Test environment (where the

changes are in place), users compare the result in Test to the actual result in Live. Work performed should prove that the changes work as expected and that nothing else was inadvertently affected by the change.

Changes are easy to assess and make. However, even the simplest change can have a major impact on how the system works, and we've only scratched the surface of change management. To ensure that the impact is manageable, extensive testing must occur. Experience has shown that this is an area where every organization can improve.

Finally, those who are making and testing changes must be encouraged to discuss the changes that are being made. Effective communication inevitably will reveal conflicts with issues that might not have been considered. Do not consider this a failure in planning. It's open communication. Just have a plan ready for any issues that do come up during implementation.

Larry Houghton is a Beacon Partners Senior Consultant. Beacon Partners is one of the fastest-growing privately-held healthcare management consulting firms, coaching organizations in the development of strategies that are centered on maximizing Enterprise Yield performance. To achieve top levels of performance, an organization must factor strategic direction, physician alignment, economic incentives and overall market impact. Our experience has proven that focus on these critical success factors will strengthen an organization's position in the market and, ultimately, improve the patient's experience with the provider.

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