

Communicating with Public Health Organizations: An Inventory of Capacities in the European Countries

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Abstract. The European Centre of Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) is an EU agency established in 2005 with the mission to identify, assess and communicate current and emerging threats to human health posed by infection diseases. In order to keep high quality relations with our stakeholders, it was identified the crucial need of creating a database with relevant, updated and reliable information about the contacts and organizations in the Member States. The ECDC Contacts and Organizations Database (ECO DB) aims to avoid duplications, overlapping and to increase the quality in the communication with the ECDC's stakeholders. Microsoft CRM is the IT platform used to create the ECO DB. CRM provides a competitive set of functionalities which make this IT tool an excellent solution for contacts management which facilitates and improves the communication between the Member States and the ECDC.

Keywords: Information architecture, Public Health, communication.

1 Introduction

The European Centre of Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) is an EU agency established in 2005 with the mission to identify, assess and communicate current and emerging threats to human health posed by infection diseases. In order to achieve this mission, ECDC works in partnership with national protection bodies across Europe to strengthen and develop continent-wide disease surveillance and early warning systems. By working with experts throughout Europe, ECDC pools Europe's health knowledge, so as to develop authoritative scientific opinions about the risks posed by current and emerging infectious diseases.

ECDC activities rely on coordination and constantly involve communication and exchange of information with many external organizations and people. ECDC is a fast growing organization, both in terms of people and functional coverage and activities.

The conditions for collecting, storing and maintaining of information are rapidly changing. It is vital to choose the proper information technology tools for collecting and distributing constantly growing information, since the stored and maintained data must be true, reliable and updated. Accurate and timely information provided in a professional manner is the key to any service operation.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software might be the right solution [1]. CRM highlights the importance of using information technologies in creating, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships. However, there is a need to develop a better understanding of CRM and how public health companies can use IT tools such as CRM.

There are many ways to use CRM. The most important aspect to understand is how to get the most out of the database and to accept CRM as a business philosophy, rather than a marketing strategy.

2 The Use of Customer Relationship Management in Public Health

There are some other experiences in similar environments showing multiple ways of using and functioning of CRM database for the organizations' information management. For example, CRM can be implemented in non-profit organizations such as primary health care centers and hospitals [2]. Health care organizations use CRM to research and analyze capital investment decisions in ways that are not possible using only an internal operating system, to enhance direct mail, to create a strong physician-patient relationship, to help its organization retain valuable patients. Other health providers improved the interactivity of their Web site using CRM to meet the needs of their market [3]. A Midwestern U.S. hospital used its CRM database marketing program to identify those with the greatest likelihood to use or need cardiology services, coupling direct mail and an online Health Risk Assessment [4]. CRM enables the health care industry to get essential customer information and use it as efficiently as possible, thus it enables the health care sector to improve patient health, increase patient loyalty and patient retention and add new services as well [5].

3 The ECDC Contacts and Organizations Database

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) started operations in May 2005 and has since then gone through a quick start-up phase building its organization infrastructure, developing its operational principles, tools and procedures, hiring the core staff of experts and creating a solid programme framework in surveillance, scientific advice, emergency preparedness, response and training.

For its daily activities ECDC requests high quality work in the field of country relations and information. In order to reach this goal, it has been identified the crucial need of creating a database with relevant, constantly updated and reliable country information consisting of the contacts, organizations and other appropriate information in the Member States. The ECDC Country information system is the consequence of the decision that all the ECDC contacts and organizations have to be on a common database in order to avoid duplications, overlapping and to increase the quality in the communication with the ECDC's stakeholders. The objective is to build an ECDC-wide public health country inventory that provides high quality and easy to access information on all relevant aspects for ECDC.

Two years ago, ECDC decided to adopt Microsoft CRM as the IT product used to create the country information database. CRM is a term applied to processes implemented by a company to handle its contact with its customers. In ECDC, the CRM software is used to support these processes and to store information on partners. All information in the system is both accessed and entered by staff from the different units. It is easy to implement, and to connect to other products used in ECDC, such as Word, Excel, SharePoint and any SQL database.

CRM provides a competitive set of functionalities: tracking the email exchange with all ECDC contacts; contacts ownership and update processes; integration with other in-house systems (Identity Management, The European Surveillance System, Epidemic Intelligence Information System, Threat Tracking Tool, Web portal, Intranet, Terminology server, Document management system), etc. These functionalities make CRM an excellent tool for contacts management which improves the communication between the Member States and the ECDC.

An operational database of country contacts, resources and capacities based on CRM includes the developing and maintaining an inventory on communicable diseases in member states.

The main data sets included are: Contacts and organizations, reference laboratories, experts' directory, medical libraries, national media, and some other relevant information sets in the field of public health capacities.

The advantages of the Country Information in CRM are:

- Centralization of system administration;
- Easy monitoring of availability and capacity;
- Easily customizable to the ECDC needs;
- Quick response time.

As a result, this environment facilitated by CRM is increasing the added value of the work of country relations in public health.

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