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# *Go with the flow: How workflows and swimlanes can improve your organization's services*

By Alicia M. Fry, OTR/L, WellSpan Rehabilitation Services

In today's volatile economy, organizations can use workflows and swimlanes as tools to achieve and sustain high levels of efficiency and productivity.

Most professionals are familiar with workflow diagrams—a sequence of connected steps in a work process.

Another tool, called swimlanes, clarifies workflows in that the steps and participants in the process are each assigned a role and responsibility.

Careful application of workflows and swimlanes can help to improve service quality and the overall opportunity for organizational success. As organizations prepare for and maintain their conformance to CARF standards, ongoing performance improvement is embedded into the process. This article describes use of these two tools and may be helpful to staff members who look for new ways to maintain and improve performance in their organizations.

## **ASSEMBLE RESOURCES AND A WORK TEAM**

Workflows and swimlanes might originate as a visual way to map existing organizational processes, or they could be developed to address a process that has been identified as needing improvement.

An organization benefits if it includes frontline staff members in developing workflows and swimlanes. Drawing on their experience, frontline personnel can accurately describe each step of the process as well as any caveats that might be overlooked from the perspective of someone who is not directly involved in the process. In addition, staff members who perform these processes every day may have creative and practical suggestions for improvement. With these activities, you will earn more support from frontline staff members who will need to implement the processes.

Consumer focus groups and advisory councils are other valuable resources for obtaining firsthand feedback about process design and possible revisions. According to CARF standards, gathering information from personnel, persons served, and other stakeholders provides their perspectives for analysis and use in a variety of business and clinical processes.

**Frontline staff, consumer focus groups, and advisory councils are valuable resources for obtaining firsthand feedback about process design and possible revisions.**

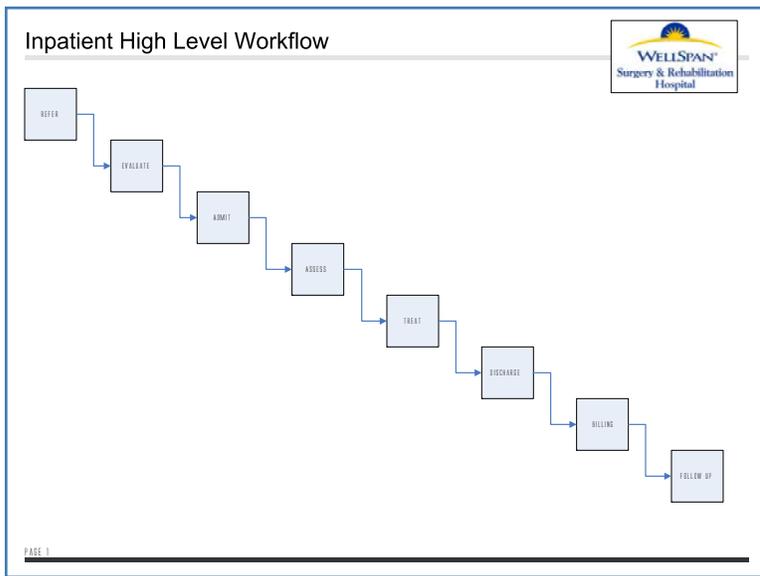


Figure 1.

## MOVE FROM AN OVERVIEW TO A DETAILED VIEW

After gathering input and assembling a work team, mapping of the processes can begin. The team will begin by documenting the high-level and overarching processes. A high-level workflow diagram provides an overview of the entire process from start to finish.

For example, a patient who is admitted to an inpatient rehabilitation facility will typically experience eight steps: referral, evaluation, admission, assessment, treatment, discharge, billing, and follow-up. A depiction of this high-level workflow is in Figure 1. Each box in the high-level workflow identifies a step that can be further detailed.

## WORKFLOWS, SWIMLANES, AND THE CARF STANDARDS

Transforming typical processes into workflow and swimlane documents can be a valuable method to help prepare for a CARF survey. Although the CARF standards do not specifically call for the use of workflows and swimlanes, these tools can help an organization to achieve conformance to standards related to work design; project management; gathering and analyzing input from personnel, persons served, and other stakeholders; strategic planning; reducing risk; and performance analysis and improvement. The tools also can help identify clinical or service processes and procedures and areas for improvement related to service provision.

Upon completion of documentation, revision, and testing of workflows and swimlanes, the team can lay the current process and desired future process documents side by side to monitor whether all applicable CARF standards are being met.

Workflows and swimlanes can help demonstrate conformance to a number of standards in the ASPIRE to Excellence<sup>®</sup> section of the CARF standards manuals, which are applied across the Aging Services, Behavioral Health, CARF–CCAC, Child and Youth Services, Employment and Community Services, and Medical Rehabilitation accreditation areas:

- **Leadership:** Evidence of a person-centered philosophy. The first lane in a swimlane is always for the person served, because each process begins with the person served (see Figures 2 and 3). Including the persons served as a part of these diagrams helps to ensure that their needs and goals are central and their roles are always taken into account.
- **Input from Persons Served and Other Stakeholders:** During the development and identification of workflows and swimlanes, it is critical that persons served, personnel, and other stakeholders are engaged in gathering input to describe both what happens and what is expected to happen in the process.
- **Health and Safety:** Maintaining a healthy and safe environment. Workflows and swimlanes are forms of written documentation to support safety for persons served and personnel.
- **Risk Management:** By reviewing steps of the process, risks can be identified and potential loss exposures reduced or eliminated.
- **Legal Requirements:** Compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements. Staff members' awareness of their individual roles and responsibilities can help ensure compliance.

These are only a few examples in which workflows and swimlanes can assist an organization to demonstrate conformance to the CARF standards.

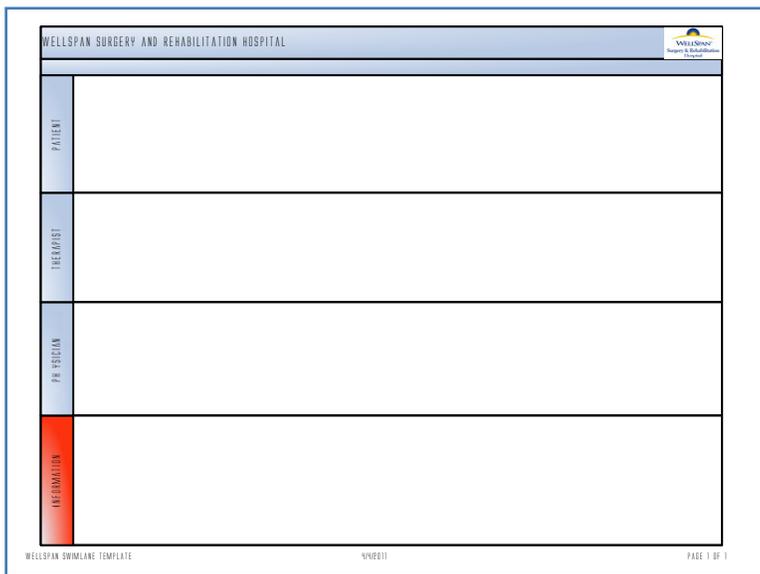


Figure 2.

After mapping the high-level workflow, the work team will examine each box on the workflow and discuss what actions are required to complete that step, which lays the foundation for diagramming swimlanes. Each member of the work team with a role or responsibility in the workflow receives a swimlane. The person served (customer), as the main focus, will always be identified in the first swimlane on the document, as shown in Figure 2.

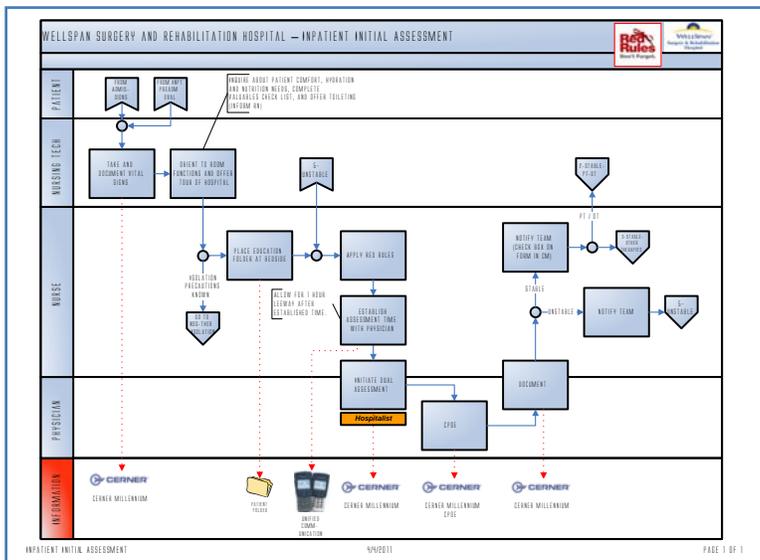


Figure 3.

For example, during the assessment step, the key players are the person served, nursing technician, nurse, and physician. Each player is assigned a swimlane. An additional swimlane captures information that is essential to the functioning of the other key players. As the team discusses the workflow, each action in the assessment step is recorded in the appropriate swimlane, illustrated in Figure 3.

## HOW WELLSPAN USES THE WORKFLOWS AND SWIMLANES

Staff members at WellSpan Health, an integrated health system serving south central Pennsylvania, discovered that using workflows and swimlanes allowed the organization to make improvements in patient care while streamlining existing processes.

Workflows and swimlanes were instrumental in developing the operational structure of the WellSpan Surgery and Rehabilitation Hospital, scheduled to open in early 2012. Staff members report workflows and swimlanes helped them to:

- Prepare for CARF accreditation.
- Support general operations.
- Meld new processes seamlessly into the existing healthcare system.

These are only a few examples in which workflows and swimlanes can assist an organization to demonstrate conformance to the CARF standards.

In preparation for designing and building electronic health records, WellSpan therapists in the acute care setting devised workflow and swimlane documents that tracked their daily processes. Based on the workflow mapping of those processes, the team was able to identify and eliminate duplicative steps and needless processes, resulting in increased efficiency and productivity.

For example, therapists used to hold a daily workload distribution meeting during lunchtime. The original purpose of this meeting was to discuss the afternoon caseload and patient issues, although the meeting often became a conversation about the therapists', rather than the patients', needs. After careful review, the therapists determined that the meeting did not benefit either the patients or the therapists. The elimination of the meeting from the daily workflow yielded an additional 30 to 45 minutes for treatment time for each therapist—a value added for patients.

The work team needs to document each action in the steps of a process as it is currently performed, even if it seems like an insignificant detail, to capture the current process on paper. Mapping out the entire process in detail will pinpoint complexities, which are often opportunities for improvement.

## AFTER MAPPING THE CURRENT WORKFLOW, DEVELOP AND TEST AN IDEAL WORKFLOW

Mapping out the entire process in detail will pinpoint complexities, which are often opportunities for improvement.

During the work team's assessment of the current workflow, team members might ask questions like, "Why do we do it this way?" and "What can be done to improve the efforts?" Staff members are usually amazed by how many steps they complete during their workday, some of which might be repetitive or unnecessary.

After reviewing the current workflow and swimlanes and gathering input for improvement, the work team can develop the ideal—or desired future—workflow and swimlanes.

After the desired future process is mapped, work team members need to test the new workflow. Testing can confirm or disprove the appropriateness of the proposed future process. During testing, the team might find that workflows

and swimlanes that appeared effective and efficient on paper might not be practical in real-life situations. Future workflows and swimlanes must always be regarded as dynamic, and revisions are likely.

## WORKFLOWS AND SWIMLANES CAN IMPROVE TEAMWORK

The culture of teamwork within an organization can be greatly enhanced with the use of workflows and swimlanes. Swimlanes, in particular, allow interdisciplinary team members to easily visualize their roles and understand how the roles are interconnected with others. Using these documents, an organization can identify seamless transitions of services (sometimes called *handoffs*).

A swimlane approach to documenting workflows can highlight competencies and areas that need staff education. In orienting new staff members who are visually inclined learners to the organization, workflows and swimlanes can enhance the identification of each team member's part in various processes.

Adding a policy statement to workflows and swimlanes can augment policies and procedures manuals with visual representations.

Organizations desiring to improve efficiency and productivity should consider using workflows and swimlanes. The application of these tools can help analyze organizational complexities and provide a structure to incorporate staff input into process improvements. Workflows and swimlanes reinforce safe, efficient, and person-centered care.

A swimlane approach to documenting workflows can highlight competencies and areas that need staff education.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alicia M. Fry, OTR/L, is a clinical supervisor in the Rehabilitation Services department at WellSpan Health in York, Pennsylvania, and a member of the development team for the WellSpan Surgery and Rehabilitation Hospital. Her experience includes eight years working as an occupational therapist in inpatient rehabilitation facilities, long-term care, and acute care hospital settings. A graduate of Elizabethtown College with a degree in occupational therapy, she is currently pursuing a master of health administration degree from Pennsylvania State University.

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Address correspondence to the editor.

## 2011 STANDARDS MANUALS EFFECTIVE JULY 1, 2011

2011 standards manuals are available. Be sure to keep up to date with the changes made from the previous manual. If you do not yet have the 2011 manual, please order yours today at the online store.

### UPDATES TO THE STANDARDS MANUALS

CARF strives to incorporate field comments and streamline standards whenever possible. For details regarding standards changes in 2011, please review the *Changes in the 2011 Manual* section in the manuals.

We also strongly encourage you to review the *Accreditation Policies and Procedures* section in the manuals, as this information is subject to annual updates and accredited organizations are required to adhere to CARF policies and procedures throughout their accreditation.

- The 2011 standards manuals are used for all on-site surveys scheduled between July 1, 2011, and June 30, 2012.
- If your organization is accredited and you will not have a survey between July 1, 2011, and June 30, 2012, your organization should maintain conformance to current standards, policies, and procedures. Please thoroughly review the appropriate manual so that your organization can remain current on the standards implementation.
- You are also encouraged to order the companion Survey Preparation Workbook for your standards manual. Filling out the workbook helps to ensure that you remain in conformance to the standards.

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