The Cloud's Silver Lining for Improving Admissions Officers' Workflow

By Bob Burke and Art Mahoney
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To understand how technology can help improve the college application and enrollment process, as well as the professional lives of college admissions officers, one need look no further than the healthcare profession.

Before the advent of electronic medical records, nurses spent a quarter of their day dealing with prescriptions. When electronic patient records came along, prescriptions were sent online to the pharmacy, essentially giving nurses back that 25 percent. Consequently, these highly-skilled healthcare professionals could spend more time doing what they were trained to do: treat the patient.

For college admissions officers, communicating and interacting with potential students is their version of "patient engagement." In fact, few in a college's administration are more focused on personal engagement than the admissions officers. They are the de facto face of the institution, implementing their school's enrollment strategy, attending high school fairs and open houses. This personal touch is often required to describe the institution and determine the fit between the school and an applicant. Good people skills are a must.

In addition, the admissions professional also faces the challenge of evaluating applicants as thoroughly as possible. Often, a veritable mountain of paper-based information must be assembled to support the decision process. They are also under pressure not just to connect with the best students, but to identify those most likely to attend. Efficiency, accuracy, and speed must augment those stellar people skills.

An institution's acceptance rate and graduation rate are major factors in a school's competitive ranking. Good admissions decisions, in concert with a sound enrollment strategy, can

significantly impact these measures in a positive way. With better information—and less paper to shuffle—an admissions professional can spend more time recruiting and evaluating students to help achieve the school's academic, social, and demographic aspirations.

The trouble is that time often works against admissions. There is a hard deadline on the front end of the process (the date when students are informed of their admissions decision). Time is perishable, and every minute taken away from recruitment and student engagement is time irretrievably lost. Therefore, the primary directive for those assembling the applicant folder, besides being accurate and thorough, is to prepare it as quickly as possible. This maximizes the opportunities to review the application, rate and rank the optimal candidates, and more importantly, carve out personal time for student engagement.

Data, Data Everywhere

Technology has proved to be a key factor in expediting those tasks that precede an admission evaluation. Even so, the paper-based process still being relied on in many college settings is less than ideal. Not only is it highly inefficient in and of itself, it also translates to higher costs, increased labor requirements (and associated training costs), potential inaccuracies, and significant security issues.

Typically, most institutions deal with a hybrid of paper and electronic information. Recently, more and more schools have deployed imaging technologies in an effort to enhance their operations. When information arrives from applicants, it is filed for review in a paper folder or scanned into an imaging system. In some cases, large staffs and expensive equipment are required to process data from what can be tens of thousands of applicants. Is this really a model of organization and efficiency? Of course not. But information must be assembled and prepared for evaluation and there can be no decisions rendered otherwise.

To make matters worse, the shortcomings of paper-based or imaged application reviews are exacerbated by a rising applicant pool. The popularity of online and universal applications has made applying to multiple schools simpler than ever. While convenient for students, increased application volume creates additional bottlenecks for an institution. And, as schools require more in-depth information than ever before to achieve the right fit between student and institution, a "perfect storm" of data is the inevitable result.

At the same time that application volume is increasing, CFOs are placing increased pressure on admissions offices to contain costs wherever possible—or at least scale back their budget requests. This means that hiring temporary workers, or paying overtime for full-time employees, can become a major obstacle for a department that has not traditionally encountered significant cost-containment efforts.

As if that isn't enough of a constraint, consider the fact that a physical folder cannot exist in multiple places at the same time. Simultaneous work on different parts of the same file, while technically possible if two people are in the same room, is far from practical. Plus, with today's concerns about privacy and identity theft, many schools are hesitant to remove a folder from the security of the Admissions Office. This limits work from home, the road, or other such efficiencies that might offset some of the challenges listed above. Some schools, unhappy with this inefficient, paper-centric approach, have sought out technological alternatives. The fact is, there are a wide range of offerings that can improve the admissions process to some degree: software that integrates with third-party test score suppliers; programs that integrate with electronic transcripts; systems that can assist with outreach; and, as mentioned earlier, online application systems. Yet, as utilitarian as these systems may be, none address the entire admissions process from start to finish.

An Image Problem

To be sure, many schools have adopted document management systems to create a paperless environment and expedite the admission process. These systems generate a document in the form of an image, which is undoubtedly better for its readers—the admissions counselors. However, these products often fail to address bottlenecks at the real source: the front end. Someone still has to open the mail, and prepare and scan the appropriate data, as well as file the documents. In the end, imaging systems don't appreciably reduce the time it takes to get information into a usable form, even though they make it easier to view the result.

Even with the technologies that are somewhat effective, there is an inherent problem: while the admission officer's lot may improve, the IT department has to undertake a major implementation, apply patches and upgrades, design workflow, and manage the server. In other words, while the burden is reduced for one operation, another assumes it.

Also, because the IT department typically selects any new workflow or document management system, the ultimate purchase can often become generic so it can be used campus-wide. In other words, if an admissions office declares that it wants to become paperless and the IT staff looks for a system that meets this request, they may have an eye toward utilizing it for other constituents, like the library, registrar, and facilities. While an understandable, even commendable approach, the result is a generic enterprise content management system.

If you're the CIO, you're probably thrilled with this scenario: you'll get one solution that fits 75 percent of what everyone needs. Most times, that's not a bad deal. Unfortunately, the admissions office—a key revenue generator—needed the system most. Even though they requested it in the first place, they may still require additional funds and/or equipment. Why? Because the new system may meet the average, calculated, annual flow of incoming

documents, but collapses under the wave of admissions applications and associated credentials that arrive between September and December each year.

When shopping for a "next generation" system to streamline and optimize the entire admissions process, the solution should address some basic criteria:

- It should be as close to paperless as possible.
- All personnel involved in the admissions process should be able to access it remotely and securely with stringent audit functions in place.
- Multiple users should be able to access a single file concurrently.
- Implementation should be simple and quick.
- The system should work in conjunction with existing business processes; the office should not have to adapt its processes to fit the system.
- The technology should be simple and easy-to-use for those lacking technical sophistication.

Measuring the Intangibles

A system that addresses at least these initial criteria can be instrumental in accelerating the admissions process while boosting accuracy. The return on investment for such a system is tangible. Besides producing a highly accurate application in a fraction of the time, an effective workflow system will save money and provide an extremely cost-effective way to manage application growth. Yet, the intangible advantages are often more attractive. Not only will the admissions officer have a tool to better meet the school's enrollment goals—especially those related to class demographics—there will be a profound impact on the officer's personal and professional life.

By being able to access the system from anywhere, through the cloud, the amount of overtime spent in the office can be reduced. Even with a huge caseload, an admissions counselor can actually leave the office at a reasonable hour, have dinner, review applications remotely, and then attend an evening college fair as a knowledgeable, energized, institutional representative. When it comes to admissions professionals, it's all about the personal touch; it has to be. Engagement is the key to success on both sides of the application. And the right workflow technology to support that can be just what the doctor ordered.

Art Mahoney is the former director of enrollment management at Northeastern University (Mass.). Bob Burke is president of FolderWave, Inc. [www.folderwave.com], a cloud-based company offering products and services designed to improve complex, high-volume time-dependent process and data management operations in many operational areas in higher education.