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Service Level Agreement of Information and Communication Technologies in Portuguese Hospitals

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Abstract

The health sector is characterized by constant change with social and economic impacts that should be considered in decision making of business relating to this sector. For this reason, and due to the existence of strong competition associated with strong regulation of the health sector, the hospital sector has adopted management systems that guarantee the quality of service delivery. Thus, hospitals are heavily dependent on the proper functioning of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). This operation is agreed between supplier / customer based on Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that describe how the system should work and penalties in case of failure or breach. Five Portuguese hospitals were contacted for analysis of performance and maintenance service contracts. The initial results of the analysis of 38 proposals from two hospitals, point to the need for significant improvements in the details of the specification of such contracts.

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1. Introduction

With increased competition in the markets and the rapid evolution of new technologies and media, the generation of innovations capable of increasing the economic value of hospitals and companies who serve them become an added value to organizations nowadays. These resources, mainly, are obtained by contracting entities external to hospitals. Although hospitals act as autonomous business units, there is a specific area that implements, promotes and ensures the functioning of internal assets and services (Departments of Information Systems), sometimes hiring external assets and services is required (outsourcing).

In this sense, and over the last few years, methodologies have emerged to optimize the business processes of enterprises and the management of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). There are known and implemented frameworks worldwide as the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL), which is used by over 10,000 companies worldwide [1]. According to ITIL, the product must be delivered to the organization as a service [2]. In ICT area this approach is known as Service Level Management (SLM), whose main instrument is designated based on Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

These SLAs should detail and rigorously document the requirements and agreed service levels, so that they are defined in appropriate and understandable terms for the part involved, in order to ensure that service needs can be met. These should ensure that the relationship between hospitals and providers is balanced and that the hospital can establish a defensive strategy towards the provider in case of failure and at the same time provide an objective basis to evaluate the effectiveness and quality of service failure [3]. These aspects being important in any industry, acquire particular importance when there is critical systems and human lives at risk, as in the case of hospital. However, for an outsourcing to have positive results, it is necessary a clear and objective understanding of the set of commitments between the provider and the customer according to business priorities, without the associated costs being extrapolated. This understanding allows the provider to have a clear idea of the scope for which it was hired and the customer when receiving the product range or exceed the initial expectations. Thus, there is a need to formalize this relationship between customer and provider, through a contractual document that explicitly describe the assets or services to be contracted, the goals and objectives to be achieved to fulfil the set of requirements and commitments agreed. This need arises from the fact that companies often do not understand their responsibilities towards customers, generating different expectations for each party and dissatisfaction for both [4].

In the following section is intended to understand the political, social and economic impacts that influence reality in Portuguese hospitals and the relevance of the contractual documents between providers and hospital entities. Then, in section 3, is intended to analyse in more detail the concept, objectives and advantages that SLAs have in the definition and evaluation of quality metrics for the provision of services. In section 4 is presented very briefly the purpose of this investigation and in section 5, are briefly presented the steps performed to this research and the results obtained so far. Finally in section 6 the discussion and the conclusions from this research are presented.

2. Importance of SLAs in Health

Health systems are facing currently a structural dilemma associated with the continuous corporatization of the health sector in Portugal, financing models, reforms imposed at the level of primary care, the continuous increased pressure on public finances, the need to control deficits and debt levels, the increasing demands of users and society itself, and the use of new health practices, a result of increasing technological developments that we have seen [5]. This evolution reflects the need for hospitals to adapt new management tools, capable of responding to the demands of enterprise management to be developed in these institutions, as well as increased concern with the assessment of the results, in order to ensure efficient management of limited resources they have. The urgency of this situation makes possible the conceptualization and adoption of management tools that show a health system with highest quality, supported by criteria of efficiency and effectiveness, without questioning the essences principles of quality, equity and access to health care [6].

However, the containment of state spending and the need to make severe budget cuts in certain areas of public intervention, including healthcare, are seen as essential to the consolidation of the goals of state action, even if that the objective of serve the public interest is compromised. In fact, in some countries, hospitals are reported to be responsible for more than half of public spending on health - 15 628,1 million EUR, only in the year 2012 [7]. So the high weight of hospital spending, has led to the successive introduction of changes in the way these units are managed in an attempt to reverse the trend in spending on public hospitals. Thus, it becomes extremely important to

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