

SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE

Understanding Multiple Meanings of Terms Used by Child Welfare Program and IT/Data Staff to Support Diligent Recruitment

Data is a crucial tool for developing and implementing comprehensive diligent recruitment programs and plans. As the child welfare field becomes increasingly data informed and data driven, there is great growth in communication and collaboration between child welfare program staff and staff focused on data or information technology (IT). This collaboration can create valuable new approaches for integrating data and continuous quality improvement (CQI) into the work of recruiting, developing, and supporting families, but it may also involve some confusion as program staff and data/IT staff try to understand key terms and phrases that their colleagues use.

The terms below are examples of key words and phrases that program and data/IT staff may use but that may have different meanings depending on whether they are used in the context of child welfare program work or data/IT work. These are just a small selection of the terms that have either dual or differing meanings, and therefore require further clarification between program staff and data/IT staff in child welfare systems. In addition to providing brief explanations of each term, we offer ideas for how to communicate effectively about them.

TERM	MEANING FOR PROGRAM STAFF	MEANING FOR IT/DATA STAFF	COMMUNICATION TIPS
Application/App	A form a person uses to seek a determination of eligibility or provision of services (e.g., an application to participate in a summer camp, an application to become a foster parent).	A specific task that is completed by a computer program.	A program person might refer to the application as an “application form” or just “form” leaving the term “application” to refer to the automation of that form on the computer. An IT person might refer to an application being built as an “app” or might want to use the term “automated form” instead.

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Attribute	<p>Characteristics or qualities of a person, case, or program.</p>	<p>Characteristics of a file or document. For example, a read-only attribute refers to a file that cannot be edited, it can only be read. “Attribute” is sometimes used as a synonym for “field.”</p>	<p>Program staff refer to attributes of people or programs they might want captured in a computer system, while IT staff refer to attributes of objects within that computer system. When using the term, both program and IT staff should be careful to use it in a clear context, such as referring to it as a “client attribute,” a “service attribute,” a “client-screen attribute,” or a “date-of-birth-field attribute.”</p>
Business Process	<p>Program staff might refer to this as work process, procedures, or decision-making process.</p>	<p>An activity or set of activities that will accomplish a specific organizational goal. IT developers use what is called “business process mapping” to visualize through a flow chart of sequenced activities with specific decision points what the business process looks like and what part the computer can play in that process.</p>	<p>When program and IT staff come together to map a business process for automation, program staff tend to see the business process as planned yet flexible in order to meet varying client needs, while IT developers are looking for a standard, less-flexible process with predictable and consistent steps and decision points. The discussion works best when program staff and IT staff provide both views by first establishing the normal flow of the business process and then discussing flexibility for deviations from the standard process.</p>

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Case/Case Record	<p>May refer to a single client or individual, a family, a household, an applicant or a provider and generally holds documents and recorded actions over a specified period of time. Cases can be open or closed and one of the above might have more than one case or case type.</p>	<p>IT staff see a case record as linked or connected data tables containing case-related information. They may refer to sections of the case as well as the whole case as a file, such as the family file or provider file.</p>	<p>Data systems capture information very efficiently. Information about a person might be collected in multiple data tables and linked to form the person file or folder. Person files are linked to form a family file or folder. Either individual or family files can be linked to an investigation file containing a collection of multiple data tables with information relating to investigations. How this information needs to be linked in the system is of vital importance. Therefore, program and IT staff must communicate and work together to clearly define what information comprises a specific case record.</p>
Client	<p>A person to whom services are provided.</p>	<p>Refers to a computer that uses sources provided by a server or main computer. It is also another name for a software program used to connect to a server. You might also hear an IT person refer to those using computers connected to the system as clients.</p>	<p>Most IT staff know that their agency serves people known as clients. Confusion can arise when IT staff use the term “client” when referring to parts of the computer system and program staff think they are referring to agency clients. IT staff can avoid this confusion by using other terms such as computers or laptops when referring to clients attached to the server.</p>

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Connections/Connectivity	Persons to whom one talks with frequently or belongs to the same social group.	The ability of one computer system to talk with another computer system.	In order to avoid confusion in using this term, it is best to refer to people/organizations by name and their computer systems by name. For example, “In order to better serve citizens at our agency and the Department of Health, we want our computer system C-DATA to have connectivity with the Health Department’s computer system H-DATA.”
Hardware	Tools used to accomplish a task. For example, hammers used to nail a wall up or other such things you might find in a hardware store.	The tangible part of a computer, including the mechanical, magnetic, electronic and electrical components making up a computer system (dictionary definition).	Program staff should understand that IT staff might refer to any piece of equipment attached to or connected to the computer system as hardware. This also includes laptops, tablets, keyboards, and even phones connected over Wi-Fi.
Instrument	Tool used to accomplish a task. This can include forms such as survey instruments or decision-making instruments that might be presented to IT to be built into a computer application.	Devices or instructions installed in hardware or software for the purpose of monitoring a system’s operation or a component of that system.	Program staff can refer to the instrument as an “instrument form” or just “form.” Both IT and program staff can refer to the automation of the instrument as an automated form.
License	Indicates a foster care, adoption, or guardianship study has been completed and approved and a family is officially approved to accept a placement.	The purchase of a program that is limited to a number of computers and cannot be shared without expressed permission of the owner.	To avoid confusion, it is best to describe the type of license. For example, a “License for a Foster Home” or a “Microsoft Office License.”
Networking	Communicating with colleagues with a specific purpose in mind.	The act of connecting computers to one another.	Both IT and program staff should have a conversation about how computer networking might be used to enhance networking with colleagues or community partners.

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Open Source	Sometimes used in procurement and contracting processes for goods or services.	A program where the source code is available to the general public for use or modification of the original design.	Open source is a similar term for both IT and program staff. Open source in procurement of goods may mean that items for both program and IT can be purchased from any provider and are not restricted to a specified list of providers. When discussing open source software, it means that the software is generally free and available in an unlicensed format.
Policy	A course of action adopted by a program that guides practice.	A set of rules and procedures regarding proper use of or procurement of hardware software and general data systems.	IT and program policy are both important and must be communicated during system development or maintenance. In some cases IT policy or program policy might need to be changed to avoid conflict with the other.
Program	A grouping of activities and services provided by an entity to meet the needs of a client group (e.g., a respite care program).	A software application or software program is the most commonly found software on the computer. For example, Microsoft Word is a word processing program that allows users to create and write documents.	This one can really get confusing unless both sides communicate clearly about what they are referencing. Program staff could use the term “services,” such as “foster care services.” IT/data staff could use the words “application” or “app” to avoid confusion.
Programming	In some disciplines it is used to describe a client’s treatment program.	Creating a sequence of instructions to enable the computer to do something.	Program staff should understand that when IT/data staff refer to programming, they are usually referring to the process of building the application through writing the instructions for the computer.

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Protocol	Instructions to follow to complete a task (e.g., protocol for completing a home study, a treatment protocol).	A sequence of instructions that a computer can interpret and execute.	Protocol for both service delivery and the IT system might be the same, but one is carried out by people while the other is done by a computer. Communicating which one is being discussed is the key to ensuring clarity.
Provider	An entity whose business it is to provide a service to a client that addresses a particular need (e.g., group home, residential treatment center, transportation service). Some program staff also refer to resource parents as “providers.”	An entity whose business it is to provide a service such as internet access, IT support or application development and support.	The word “provider” often means essentially the same thing to both program and IT staff. When both are talking about tracking providers in a computer system being built by a provider it can get confusing. Referring to the type of provider, such as mental health provider and software provider, can alleviate some confusion.
Query	To question someone to elicit information.	A way of asking questions of a database or other computer records.	To be clear, refer to either querying a person/organization or querying the data.
Report	A document that provides either quantitative or qualitative data intended to be informative. This term may also be used to refer to information a child welfare agency receives about a child or home where there may be a need for an investigation of possible child abuse or neglect.	Data generated by a specific computer query of the data within a system.	Since IT staff see reports as something generated by the data system, it may be difficult for them to understand why program staff want to enter reports into the system unless they hear the child-protection definition of a report and it is always referred to as a “Child Abuse Report.” To help further clarify, the term “data reports” can be used to describe system-generated reports.

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Services	Assistance provided to clients intended to be helpful to achieving an intended goal.	Services such as internet services, Web hosting services or other Web services. Web services allow organizations to communicate data to perform specified functions such as payments or data sharing.	To avoid confusion it is best for both program and IT staff to describe the service they are referring to and name it each time they use the word. For example, internet services or medical services.
Server		A computer that individual computers are connected to on a network that provides shared resources such as files and printers.	IT staff maintain and control files and systems on a server. Program staff may need to talk with IT about what types of workers or providers are on the server and therefore can share information across the server. Generally this is called an intranet (as opposed to the internet).
Software		Written programs, procedures or rules and associated documentation pertaining to the operation of a computer system that are stored in read/write memory (dictionary definition).	When talking about the purchase of computer programs or applications, IT staff may use the term software to refer to a packaged set of such items.
Social Network	A person's network of friends, family, and other people who support the person.	Use of the internet to connect with personal or business contacts for the purpose of sharing information (e.g., using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn).	For many people, internet-based social networking services are now part of how people connect with their networks of support. IT staff should be made aware of the importance of these networks to youth and families and that program staff may need to be able to communicate with youth and families through social networks.

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Window		An object on a computer desktop that can be resized, moved, hidden, restored or closed. Usually includes graphical objects such as a tool-bar, menu-bar, controls, icons, and often a working area.	When designing or modifying a data system, IT staff will talk about windows or screens to describe places where specific program data are entered. Program and IT staff should come to an understanding of the functionality and attributes related to the window in reference to the user's preferences.

Additional suggestions for communicating between child welfare program staff and IT/data staff.

- Don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions of your colleagues. Only through a thorough understanding can agency data needs be met satisfactorily.
- Have an interpreter or liaison involved in the conversation, someone who understands the program side and the IT side to help everyone understand each other.
- Pay attention to body language and silence to see if people need further clarity on something being discussed. Err on the side of ensuring that everyone understands the terms you are using.



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