



Healthcare providers across the country recognize the benefits of electronic health records (EHRs) to improve care, reduce costs and improve efficiency. But as medical professionals, we know the challenges of keeping up with technology. The Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) has developed some suggestions for you as you plan EHR implementation for your practice.

GETTING STARTED

Have vision! Realizing the many benefits from implementing an EHR can help you define your vision. Translate that vision into a concrete plan that addresses your identified needs and goals.

Start by forming an EHR project team. Assign a clinician to be the team lead. Highly successful project teams include an actively participating physician champion. EHR adoption is not a “plug-and-play” experience. It is a way to improve patient care via decreased medication errors and reduction in duplicate diagnostic tests, and to improve practice efficiencies via cost savings and increased revenues.

The first assignment for your EHR project team is to write a brief mission statement. This process will help you clarify your goals and keep you motivated during the selection and implementation process.

Know your practice. Gathering some basic information about your staff, patients, and practice habits will help you to clearly define what it is you want an EHR to do for you. It also highlights potential “pain points” that can be addressed prior to EHR adoption, and gives you a way to focus the benefits of the EHR for your practice.

Are charges being lost? Accounts receivable dragging? Then focus the EHR project on charge capture and accelerating claim filing. Coding uncertainties? Defensive downcoding? Use EHR coding advisors to right-code, eliminating the need for manual review. Overcrowded waiting room? Focus the EHR project on speeding patient flow and adding capacity. Empty waiting room? Focus on preventive care reminders and chronic disease follow-up visits. Labor costs excessive? Reduce overtime by spending less time filling in forms and filing paper in charts. Transcription expenses high? Learn to document with EHR, eliminating transcription costs.

EXAMINE WORKFLOW

An EHR system can make your daily tasks, like prescription renewals and reviewing lab results, much faster and easier. However, making these changes means changing the way your practice currently conducts business.

Systematically recording your current workflow allows you to see where there is waste in your current system and to identify the potential opportunities to use electronics to make your work life more productive and error-free. Gather baseline data about how the current paper chart is being used. Who? What? Where? When? Are these the same places and people who will also use a computer? Automating a bad process not only ensures that we can do a bad job every time, but that we can do it faster and with less effort.¹

SELECT THE RIGHT VENDOR

Make a list of functional requirements in an EHR that you can't live without. Think about the top 20 reasons you want to have an EHR, write them down and make a score sheet out of the list. Evaluate all of the vendors you review based on the same criteria.

The [Institute of Medicine](#) has published a list of key capabilities that any EHR system should have. Incorporate those criteria into your list.²

The [Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology](#) is a voluntary, private-sector initiative that certifies HIT products. Their recommendations and research can help you feel confident that you have selected a good program.³

Ask your professional societies and colleagues about products that work well in your specialty. Some vendors make business arrangements with medical societies that improve the affordability of an EHR. Use an EHR selection tool or report to help compare multiple vendors on a wide variety of criteria.

NEGOTIATE A GOOD CONTRACT

Take advantage of competition within the EHR market to negotiate a contract that meets the specific needs of your practice. Hire a professional to review your contract before you sign. The contract may seem straight forward; the professional will help you understand the information that's not blatantly stated.

Make sure that the contract specifies the level of support you can expect when the vendor leaves your practice site. How much training will you receive? What happens when you have technical problems or other issues? How many calls for ongoing technical support can you make?

Ask for references from the vendor before you sign. It's a good idea to visit a practice that has implemented that vendor's product. You will benefit tremendously from their lessons learned. For example, seek recommendations for an adequate service level agreement to require from the vendor to ensure your success. Also, inquire how much you should temporarily decrease your patient volume, if any, to account for the learning curve of your new electronic system.

PLAN CAREFULLY FOR A SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

How to transfer existing paper-based information, and what documents to transfer into the new EHR are two of the most important decisions you will make. For instance, results from diagnostic tests, especially from a visit to a specialist, is information to consider for conversion to digital form.

Train approximately 1 super-user for every 25 employees in your clinic to help educate new staff about the EHR. This helps to eliminate the need for costly, ongoing vendor support. Establish an escalation of support plan so that users immediately know whom to contact and what to do if the system fails.

Don't be tempted to rush through the testing and training period. Spend an adequate amount of time ensuring the system works the way you want it to, and that everyone knows how to use it before you "go live." Assessing user comfort level through test scenarios provided by your vendor or from your site visit will help measure the readiness of staff.



For more information on HIMSS, visit www.himss.org. For more information on HIMSS Ambulatory initiatives, contact Mary Griskiewicz at mgriskiewicz@himss.org.

1. Harrington H J. *Business Process Improvement: The Breakthrough Strategy for Total Quality, Productivity, and Competitiveness*. New York: McGraw Hill; 1991.
2. www.iom.edu/?id=14391&redirect=0
3. www.cchit.org

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