OUTLOOK ASSOCIATES
A Division of Qualis Health

Tips for Success

Evaluating and Selecting an EHR System

The number, variety and complexity of EHR systems in today's market has made the search for a system complex and sometimes intimidating for many physician practices. Knowing how and where to begin in EHR system evaluation efforts has been an obstacle that has kept many practices linked to cumbersome, paper-based medical records. Other practices have dashed ahead with EHR system selection, but have often made the serious mistake of starting with a system demonstration, following up with a site visit to another practice using the system, then plunging forward into negotiations and implementation without a full understanding of system and vendor weaknesses, industry options, implications, and full costs. A careful process for defining your specific needs, priorities, technical abilities and budgets, and evaluating those vendors best aligned with these requirements and constraints, will allow your practice to move knowledgeably and confidently toward the selection of an EHR system that will work best in your unique environment and meet the clinical and financial goals of your practice.

The following outlines an effective, proven process for assuring your practice makes the best, most well informed EHR system and vendor decision:

1. Form Your Best Possible Selection Team

The EHR system you choose will have significant impact on all areas of your practice, so it is wise to include key individuals from all practice departments/areas in your system evaluation and selection process. It is critical that your practice have a strong "Physician Champion" who will serve as a key member of your selection team, but it is also very important to include nursing, medical records, and office operations. The Selection Team need not be larger than 2 – 3 individuals as long as all areas are knowledgeably represented. The team members selected should be open and enthusiastic, analytical, organized thinkers, and comfortable with the use of computers and technology. Lastly, your team members need to have the time to effectively evaluate practice needs and vendor alternatives. This may mean providing other interim support for their daily responsibilities to allow them the time to fully participate in this critical selection process.

2. Clearly Establish the Goals You Expect the System to Support

Practices seek to purchase and implement EHR system to address a number of critical clinical and operational goals including improved efficiency, reduced medical errors, improved patient care, increased reimbursement, etc. Individuals within the practice may have significantly varying perspectives on which goals are most critical and these perspectives will drive their EHR system preferences. Facilitating open discussions to review goals and priorities and develop a common, consistent set of practice goals for your initial and future phases of system use prior to starting detailed system evaluation activities will assure the team is working toward a common vision, and will save the practice significant time, energy and frustration.

3. Assure That Selection Team Members Have a Working Understanding of EHR Capabilities and Options

While it is likely that most members of your practice's Selection Team have a working understanding of EHR system functionality, it is important to assure the team begins with a common basic understanding of modules, capabilities, and options available within the EHR vendor systems to help in easing team communication, thinking through workflow implications, defining specific requirements, and envisioning future system use. Obtaining a common team understanding of EHR can be effectively accomplished through any of the following:

- An EHR training overview session by an industry organization or consultant
- Assigned reading of a common EHR introduction book
- Assigned reading of common, current articles on EHR system features and implementation considerations
- Reviews of posted web-based demonstrations (not vendor coordinated)
- Any combination of the above

It is very important that this exercise be clearly understood by all team members as an educational process only, rather than an evaluation process where preferences are determined. This is a beginning step and there remains more to learn before choosing a favorite system or vendor.

4. Understand the Current Clinical and Operational Workflows and Plan Potential Changes

Although most practice leadership assumes that their processes and workflows are well understood by most personnel, it is rarely the case that individuals have a working awareness of most processes outside of their immediate purview. Therefore, it is advised to spend some time familiarizing your Selection Team members with the full set of current clinical and operational workflows and processes used in handling a patient visit from reception, through clinical care, to billing. Once the team has an understanding of the flow of paper forms, the practice management system, the medical chart and other pertinent documents, and communication in caring for patients with various types of appointments and needs, they can begin to identify opportunities for improvement and change through implementation of an effective EHR system.

A set of workflow descriptions, either diagrams or written lists, detailing the envisioned optimal flow and processes for electronically supporting each type of visit/service should be developed, discussed and agreed upon by the team. The descriptions should clearly address the hand-off processes between departments/areas (e.g., reception to nursing, nursing to physician, physician back to nursing, nursing to lab, etc.) and outline possible automated and manual solutions to assure the appropriate hand-offs are made. These descriptions, and the understanding gained from developing and discussing them, will assure the best possible framework for identifying the specific EHR system requirements for your practice, and establishing priorities among requirements.

5. Define Your EHR System and Vendor Requirements

Based on your goals for the system, specific features and functions of EHR systems will be more important to your practice than others. Understanding and carefully documenting the specific EHR system features required by your practice will help you focus on these during the system selection process, especially when demonstrations and discussions pull attention to the “bells and whistles” versus key needs. The more specific the definition of functional requirements (e.g., allows electronic receipt of lab results into each ordering clinician’s in-box with special flagging of urgent and abnormal results for immediate attention) the easier it will be to keep in mind the full needs and expectations when viewing alternative systems. As a rule of thumb, you can expect functional requirements checklists to include 20 – 30 pages of detailed requirements for an average family practice.

In addition to the functional requirements, it is important for the practice to understand the technical capabilities and requirements of the vendor’s system, as well as to specify the technical requirements that the practice may have. Technical requirements may address system platform (e.g., network and system operating system standards), network communications options (e.g., wireless vs. cables), input methods (e.g., voice response entry capabilities vs. touch screen vs. text entry, etc.), workstation requirements (e.g., PCs vs. thin client vs. dumb terminals) and other equipment, security and system control needs.

Additional vendor expectations in terms of business focus, depth of knowledgeable resources, breadth of client base, financial status, R&D plans, etc. should be clearly articulated to help your team gain insight into viability of vendors for a long-term relationship. It is also important to clearly define the expectations your practice has of a vendor in terms of implementation and on-going customer support, contract stipulations, interface development tasks, data conversion support, etc., to serve as a check list for vendor discussions. Do not assume the vendor will include a function or service –specifically ask!

6. Use Published Vendor Comparisons to Select Best Potential Matches

The number of EHR systems on the market is significant and rather volatile, with mergers and failures occurring on a regular basis. Systems vary significantly in terms of practice scope, functionality, technology, and integration capability. Your Selection Team can waste significant time and become very confused and discouraged in an effort to adequately evaluate more than 4 -5 EHR systems. Therefore, narrowing the field of options to EHR systems that most effectively address the key priorities of your practice is critical. In the last several years, a number of excellent, unbiased reviews of EHR system features and capabilities have been completed by various medical associations and industry groups (AAFP, HIMSS, AC Group). These system reviews and comparisons are available to members via web sites. Additional comparisons are published annually in industry publications (e.g., Healthcare Informatics). Comparing the list of priority requirements you have defined to the ratings of system capabilities provided in these materials will help a Selection Team quickly identify the vendors and systems with the initial best match for their needs. These vendors will represent the “vendor short list” of candidate systems warranting more detailed investigation.

7. Obtain Capabilities Information from Leading Vendors

While most vendors are not overly willing to respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP) or Request for Information (RFI) from potential clients, especially smaller practices, they typically become more open to this effort once they understand that, through an informed process, they have been selected as a “semi-finalist” vendor. The Selection Team should package your requirements check list, including functionality, technical, and vendor expectations, into a matrix with room for a written vendor response. Ask each vendor on the short list to respond to requirements in writing prior to the demonstration of their system. The responses will yield more information as to vendor capabilities, and will point the team toward areas that need further clarification during the demonstration process.

While not ideal, as an alternative to the Capabilities Information request, it may be possible to schedule a longer period of time to go over and discuss each of the specific requirements during the vendor demonstration.

8. Know Your Total Costs

Be sure to discuss costs with all vendors who are under serious consideration, and do so – at least at a high level – fairly early in the evaluation process. These discussions should include estimates for license fees, subscription options, projected implementation and training costs, technical support costs, and any additional consulting fees that the vendor predicts might be required. Once the field of systems and vendors has been narrowed, your Selection team can validate the various cost components with experts or with other similarly situated organizations that have implemented the systems being considered.

Addressing costs early in the evaluation process will avoid your Selection Team members arriving at a selection decision only to find that the preferred system is beyond the budget of your practice. Knowing the financial constraints of your practice and determining vendor cost estimates as early as possible will help the team focus on the vendors and system options (e.g., modular-based systems where components can be added over time, ASP alternatives, etc.) within appropriate budget parameters. The team should keep in mind, however, that initial vendor cost quotes are “list prices” that can be negotiated to some extent. Vendors are very motivated to sign new business and are often willing to devise creative pricing alternatives and favorable financial terms that will allow your practice to move forward with a contract.

9. Conduct Effective Demonstrations

System vendors are anxious to have the opportunity to show their products to prospective customers, and they may encourage you to schedule a demonstration as soon as possible. However, by preparing appropriately for this key step in your evaluation process, you will be in a position to make the best use of your time – and theirs – and gain the most information possible to help in your system decision.

Before scheduling a demonstration meeting, the Selection Team should carefully prepare a set of demonstration scenarios that address the specific types of visits and envisioned workflows of your practice.

Scenarios should address all aspects of use of the system, from reception through clinical care and billing for services, to assure all key issues, data requirements, interfaces, and hand-offs of data are clearly demonstrated. Scenarios should also include examples of the many unusual circumstances faced by your practice including emergency walk-ins, cancellations, special orders, etc. It is important to provide these scenarios to the vendors several weeks in advance of the scheduled demonstration dates to give them time to prepare. All demonstrations should be scheduled to occur within a few weeks of each other to leverage the memories of participants and help make comparisons easier.

Prior to the first demonstration, your team will need to develop an evaluation form to help participants document their findings (both positive and negative) and what items remain as open questions. It is very easy in the course of a demonstration to become focused on some functions and options and to forget others that may be equally critical. Also, vendors are careful to demonstrate their products in such a way as to highlight the strengths and hide or avoid exposing the weaknesses. Using both your initial requirements checklist and an evaluation tool that follows the prepared scenarios and allows space to capture impressions, questions and concerns, will help the demonstration participants assure all scenarios are addressed and track their findings. It is wise to have as many individuals as possible from your practice involved in the demonstrations to help assure all perspectives are considered, and to help garner support through their involvement in the decision making process. It is important that all participants ask questions, seek clarification, and document as much information as possible during the demonstrations. These individual documented evaluations will serve as a key component for final “apples to apples” comparisons of systems, and will also serve as an excellent source of information to jog memories following a number of varying demonstrations.

10. Check Vendor References

Reference checks made to vendor client sites using the EHR systems being considered will provide a valuable opportunity for gaining insight into the effective use of EHR systems in a "live" environment, as well as into the satisfaction of others with the systems and the vendors. Client sites are usually very willing to share their perspectives and "lessons learned", especially with a peer (i.e., physician to physician, nurse to nurse, business office manager to business office manager). It is valuable to query the references on how well the contract process and implementation efforts went with the vendor(s). This information will help in your final decision, in setting realistic implementation timelines and in negotiating appropriate safeguards in the contract.

11. Visit a Client Site Using the EHR System

Additional insight into how well the vendor and the system will work for your organization can be gained by visiting vendor system clients whose sites are most closely related to your own business structure and operations. These visits allow the team to observe the systems in use and question system users on vendor and operational issues and concerns. Additionally, if it is decided to pursue a contract with the vendor, these visits provide an excellent opportunity to form relationships with other people who are already familiar with the system and implementation process. These contacts will be an excellent source of information and support as you proceed with your own implementation.

12. Reconfirm Key Issues & Understandings

Following reference checks and site visits, a number of questions will need to be clarified with the vendor(s). It is recommended that these questions be posed in writing, noting that the responses will be included in the final contract as binding. Additionally at this time, your team should have a clearer perspective on the equipment, implementation approach, conversion requirements, and other elements that are needed to obtain a reliable set of final quotes for licensing, implementation, hardware, etc. The team should reconfirm initial price quotes and clarify that all components discussed and shown during the demonstrations, and provided in response to capabilities/requirements questions, are included in the costs. This will set the baseline for price negotiation and help protect against unexpected add-ons during negotiations or at a later date.

13. Make Your Decision with Confidence

The above due diligence process includes all the critical steps to guide your Selection Team in gathering the best vendor and EHR system information possible, effectively comparing options, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of how the leading systems will work within their practice. All systems and vendors will have some shortcomings as well as some excellent features, and there will always be some trade-offs. What is critical at this stage is to make a decision and go forward with confidence and commitment.

The final decision should be based on a thorough review of the evaluation scores and information collected for all areas – functionality, vendor viability, technology, reputation with clients, supportiveness during the evaluation process, and cost. One vendor will invariably lead in the final vote. If the team and your practice are confident in their evaluation process and committed to making the system and the relationship with the vendor work, the groundwork for EHR success is in place.

14. Negotiate Knowledgeably

Negotiating a successful contract with a systems vendor requires much more than just achieving favorable financial terms. License fee, maintenance, implementation, support, acceptance, payment terms, and other details must be spelled out carefully in the formal written agreement. Legal support during the negotiation process is strongly recommended. A clear, thorough contract will ensure a positive start to your relationship with the vendor and help avoid misunderstandings later.