Electronic Health Records: Selecting the Right Vendor

The federal HITECH Act requires hospitals and other healthcare organizations to demonstrate “meaningful use” of electronic health record (EHR) technology, in order to qualify for incentive payments from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).1

Since passage of the HITECH Act in 2009, healthcare facilities have sought to acquire EHR systems that increase efficiency and help control costs, while also complying with the edict to improve the quality of care. However, research suggests that as many as half of EHR implementation efforts have either failed completely or produced suboptimal results, often due to haphazard selection of vendors or products.2

Successful transition to electronic health records depends on organizational readiness for change, strong planning and communication efforts, an adequate budget, and sound selection protocols and criteria. If even one of these factors is lacking, a newly acquired EHR system may actually decrease access to information, frustrate vital diagnostic processes, compromise patient privacy, fall short of regulatory compliance and / or jeopardize claims defensibility.

To assist healthcare professionals in the challenging task of defining system needs and assessing vendors and products, this Alert Bulletin® outlines the six major stages in the EHR selection process.

1. Create an EHR adoption team. Comprising professionals from such areas as health information management, clinical operations, risk management / quality improvement / patient safety, scheduling, billing and coding, and corporate compliance, the team should bring a wide range of experience and expertise to bear on the vendor selection and EHR implementation process.

2. Identify specific compliance goals and system functions. The EHR adoption team should be tasked with establishing focused, realistic goals and priorities, such as the following:

- Safeguard patient data and comply with HIPAA privacy requirements.
- Satisfy CMS requirements for meaningful use of an electronic health record. (For a vendor meaningful use comparison tool, visit http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/implementation-resources/vendor-meaningful-use-compare-tool.)
- Offer flexible and customized data entry formats that reflect provider documentation needs, patient flow patterns (e.g., intake assessments, nursing notation, procedural flowsheets, discharge processes) and the organization’s definition of the legal health record.
- Permit remote access by healthcare professionals.
- Facilitate secure clinical messaging between providers using different tools (e.g., Internet-connected computers, wireless tablets, mobile devices).
- Provide adequate data storage, whether web-based or on-site.
- Interface with existing hardware, including computer networks and servers.
- Operate within the established IT infrastructure, including current server and Internet connections.
- Support e-discovery protocols in the event of a claim, and otherwise align with risk management processes.

3. Determine the quality rating of potential vendors. The first step in narrowing the vendor field involves eliminating from consideration EHR systems that lack a product certification and "meaningful use" guarantee. For a reference list of EHRs and modules that have been tested and certified by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, visit the Certified Health IT Product List at http://oncchpl.force.com/ehrcert.

In addition, various independent research bodies – such as KLAS (www.klasresearch.com), AC Group (www.acgroup.org) and Forrester Research (www.forrester.com) – evaluate IT vendors using a range of criteria, including:

- Financial strength and industry experience.
- Technical and training support.
- Customer satisfaction ratings.
- Research and development acumen.
- Implementation plans and procedures.

1 “Meaningful use” refers to the adoption of certified EHR technology in a manner that provides for the electronic exchange of health information to improve the quality of care, as defined by CMS at http://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Legislation/EHRIncentivePrograms/Meaningful_Use.html

To qualify for EHR use incentives, providers and organizations must submit information on quality of care to the Secretary of Health & Human Services. For more information on meaningful use regulations and the CMS three-stage incentive program, see http://www.healthit.gov/policy-researchers-implementers/meaningful-use-regulations.

4. Conduct due diligence. Gaps in preliminary research can be filled by submitting a formal Request for Information (RFI) to vendors about their products and services. RFIs should include the following queries, among others:
- The vendor’s profile (i.e., basic information) and years in business.
- Total monies allocated for research and development.
- Presence of certified trainers on staff specializing in healthcare applications.
- Number of equivalent-sized systems the vendor has installed for healthcare clients.
- Availability of on-site and web-based training, as well as 24 / 7 customer support.
- Software licensing arrangements and user fees.
- Implementation costs, including hardware and software, staff training, program maintenance and upgrades, and patient education on use of web-based portals.

A sample RFI template can be found on the Stratis Health website, at http://www.stratishealth.org/expertise/healthit/clinics/clinic_toolkit.html. (Scroll down to “1.3 Select” and click “Request for Proposal doc.”)

5. Request references. Active and past healthcare clients provide a useful perspective on a vendor’s actual performance, which can aid in determining its suitability for the task at hand. Inquire about experiences before, during and after the EHR implementation, asking such questions as:
- Did the vendor listen closely to your needs?
- Did the vendor keep promises, including costs and time frames?
- Was the vendor aware of healthcare industry realities and concerns?
- Did the vendor provide good value, in terms of both products and support?
- Did the vendor ever disappoint you? How so?
- How did this installation compare with similar experiences?
- Has there been adequate post-installation training and follow-up?
- How did the vendor respond to complaints, concerns, and upgrade or error-correction requests?
- Should the vendor have done anything differently?

In addition, consult national organizations to determine if a vendor has a profile in the field of health IT, such as active participation in the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society Electronic Health Record Association (http://www.himssehra.org/ASP/index.asp) or the Certification Commission for Health Information Technology (www.cchit.org).

6. Arrange product demonstrations. On-site demonstrations permit providers and health IT implementers to judge the “real-life” capabilities of vendors. Administrators should suggest typical clinical scenarios and see how the EHR system would help staff navigate those situations. It is also essential to assess the product’s risk management utility, focusing on such capabilities as “foot-printing” of entries, producing documents related to e-discovery, facilitating legal review of service contracts and supporting quality improvement programs.

To assist healthcare organizations, the National Learning Consortium offers a comprehensive toolkit, titled “EHR Demonstration Scenario, Evaluation and Vendor Questions.” The toolkit can be accessed at http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/ehr-demonstration-scenario-evaluation-and-vendor-questions.

RESOURCES
- “Avenues to EHR Purchasing and Selection,” from SearchHealthIT. Available at https://searchhealthit.techtarget.com/guides/Avenues-to-EHR-purchasing-and-selection. (A variety of other EHR-related resources are available at the same site.)

For more information, please call us at 888-600-4776 or visit www.cna.com.