SPRING 2010 NEWSLETTER

It may surprise you to learn that information technology (IT) alone rarely solves problems. It's a powerful tool that can help you run an efficient medical practice – provided that you pay attention to the people both inside and outside your practice. Their knowledge, expertise, and collaboration can make it work for you – or not.

Margie Satinsky

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IS A TOOL; PEOPLE MAKE IT WORK!

Make sure that you are getting the maximum return on your current and future IT investments. Here are five suggestions for addressing the people side of technology.

1. Information Technology Implies Change; Help Your Staff Learn New Skills

More than one attempt to implement new information technology in medical practices has been sabotaged by physicians or workforce members who despise change and prefer to work as they have always done. Common examples are transitions from paper to electronic health records, shifts from one practice management system (PMS) to another, and decisions to outsource billing and collections. Unwillingness to put in the time to learn new skills, fear of failure, lack of knowledge, and uncertainty about job security often lead to resistance to change. What can you do about these concerns? Send a clear message from the top. Make change a clear priority. Acknowledge and address the concerns that your workforce raises, but don't back down. When people ask questions, answer them – or ask your PMS, EHR, or other vendor to provide clarification. Most importantly, there's no such thing as too much communication when change is underway. Tell people what is changing, when it will happen, and how important they are to making the change successful.

2. Identify a Change Agent Within Your Practice

Leadership makes a difference. Identify someone within your practice who can enthusiastically promote whatever IT change(s) you are making. Dr. Allen Wenner of West Columbia Family Medicine, a well-known proponent and educator for EHR, recommends a physician champion who not only understands IT but also has the skills to motivate and inspire others. Add an administrative person who not only supports the change but also manages it. One good example is the thoughtful implementation of a new EHR system by a pediatric practice. A senior physician, the practice administrator, and a second administrative person formed a team of three to manage the project. The vendor trained these "super users", and they in turn trained the workforce. Why? Because the practice leadership had a better sense of each individual's strengths and weaknesses than the vendor did, and the goal was to make everybody succeed in making the transition.

3. Manage the Vendor – You're Paying the Bill!

There's a common misconception that after you select an IT vendor and sign an agreement, your job ends and the vendor takes over. Don't let go of the reins – you're the driver. Here's an example related to patient portals. A new orthopaedic practice engaged an outside company to both build an informational website and add a patient portal capability. The portal allowed patients to request appointments, provide demographic and clinical information prior to a visit, obtain lab and other test results, and pay bills online. Patients experienced technical difficulties with some of these applications and stopped using them. Nobody within the practice was in charge of the project, and the vendor never knew about problems that could have easily been corrected. The owner of the practice believed he wasn't getting his money's worth. Had he established better communication with the vendor, his questions would have been answered and he would have been more satisfied.

4. Take Time to Build Vendor Relationships with Key Individuals

For those who are new to IT, it may be difficult to understand the way in which vendor representatives will work with the practice. Make sure you know each person's role and reporting relationships. Here's an example. You already know the Salesperson. After you sign the contract, he or she will introduce you to the Project Manager who will help you with implementation, training, and go-live. Following go-live, an Account Manager takes over, and you'll deal with the vendor's Technical Support staff on a day-to-day basis. Your success in getting what you need at every step of the way depends on your ability to relate to every one of these people. If change feels difficult, don't vent your frustration on vendor employees. Their role is to help you, and they can best do that if you are clear with your questions and concerns.

Speaking of questions, there's no such thing as a stupid one. If you don't understand a technical term or don't know how to respond to vendor requirements or questions, speak up. Most members of the vendor's workforce have technology backgrounds and have not worked in a medical practice. They may use technical terminology that is unfamiliar to you, just as you may use medical practice terminology that is unfamiliar to them. It's your responsibility to explain what's on your mind.

5. Get Outside Help When You Need It

For most practices, the selection and implementation of new information technology happens infrequently. It's common to feel out of your comfort zone not only with the particular application, but with the selection and implementation processes. Seek outside help from experienced consultants when you need it. There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Satinsky Consulting can help in the following ways:

- Identify vendors that offer products and services that can meet your needs. We're vendor-neutral and do not represent a particular vendor or product.
- Guide you in the selection and implementation processes, using our extensive experience to make sure you take the right steps in the right order.
- Assist in the evaluation of vendor products, plans, strengths and weaknesses, and pricing.

- Compare vendor proposals – which inevitably come in different formats.

- Negotiate price and other contract terms.

- Arrange site visits to current Satinsky Consulting clients who currently use various products.

- Assist with vendor reference checks.

- Troubleshoot in practice-vendor communications.

For any of these needs or other assistance, contact Margie Satinsky, President, Satinsky Consulting, LLC at 919 383-5998 or Margie@satinskyconsulting.com.

Articles on Selecting and Implementing Information Technology

Use the links below, or visit **www.satinskyconsulting.com/publications.htm** to read these and other articles by Margie Satinsky.

- **"Selecting Electronic Health Records and Other Technology Solutions to Support Your Practice"**
  Medical Association of Georgia Journal • 2009

- **"Suggestions for Selecting Information Technology to Support Your Practice"**
  The North Carolina Family Physician • 2009

- **"Medical Practice Excellence in the 21st Century: How to assess your practice before choosing the best information technology - Part 3 of a three-part series"**
  Skin & Aging • 2008

Upcoming Presentations on Selecting IT to Support Your Practice

April 20, 2010   **"Get It Right: Strategies for Successful IT Selection and Implementation"**
Georgia Medical Group Management Association
Stone Mountain, GA

May 6, 2010   **"EHR Choice and Implementation"**
Buncombe County Medical Society, Asheville, NC

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If you are looking for new ideas to improve your bottom line and practice operations, order **The Handbook for Medical Practice Management in the 21st Century**. The book and the companion website offer concrete suggestions and practical tools. Authored by Marjorie A. Satinsky, M.B.A., with Randall T. Curnow, Jr., M.D., M.B.A., the handbook is available from Radcliffe Press. To order the book, call 800.247.6553 or visit www.radcliffe-oxford.com.