

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Suggestions for Selecting Information Technology to Support Your Practice

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Selecting information technology to support your practice is a formidable challenge. Several years ago, four Philadelphia family physicians compared their transition from paper to electronic health records to flying an airplane without a pilot! You can avoid their negative experience by paying careful attention to your decision and implementation processes. Here are some suggestions.

1. Start with your practice, not the technology. Clarify your mission and goals before investing in expensive technology. A small practice with one location has different needs from a large practice with multiple sites and aggressive growth plans. Agree on your future direction and let the technology support your efforts.

2. Be honest about your technology readiness and receptivity. In most practices, physicians' attitudes toward technology vary greatly. Some love it, and others hope they will retire before they have to make changes in the way in which they currently practice. Structure your software selection, staff training, and implementation to accommodate everyone's needs.

3. Assess your current workflow and fix problems before you automate. If you assume that automating specific aspects of your practice operations will correct current problems in your workflow, think again. For example, transitioning from paper to electronic health records won't fix human resource problems or poor financial management. If you automate malfunctioning processes, you'll compound the problems. Fix what doesn't work before you automate.

4. Plan and implement a total information technology strategy rather than focusing on a single application. The most important IT applications are your practice management system (PMS), electronic health records (EHR), e-prescribe, your Website, and the way in which these four applications relate to each other. The components are not always discrete, so consider all the applications together rather than on a piecemeal basis. For example, look for a vendor

that offers both PMS and EHR applications that are built off the same operating platform so you won't have to worry about building and maintaining an interface between the two applications. Similarly, if you select an EHR that offers an e-prescribe feature either as an option or part of the total package, prescription information will automatically link to your EHR. If you want a patient portal, you can either build it through your Website or as part of your EHR. You get the picture – everything's intertwined.

5. Do your homework before inviting vendors to make a presentation to your practice. Take time to research the big picture about the applications in which you are interested before talking with specific vendors. Give each vendor comprehensive background information on your practice and a standard list of questions. If everybody gives you the same information, you'll have an easier time comparing the responses. Look carefully at the provisions of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Although the details are not all clear, your purchase and use of an EHR may make you eligible for incentive funds available through the Medicare or Medicaid programs. To qualify for stimulus money, you'll not only need to have your EHR in place, you must also meet requirements for interoperability and reporting on quality measures.

6. Select a vendor that is appropriate for your practice. Consider vendors that offer applications for your specialty at a price you can afford. Independent organizations like the AC Group or KLAS regularly test and rank the vendors according to specific criteria. The American Academy of Family Physicians (www.aafp.org) has a comprehensive Web site that includes input from existing physicians who are willing to share their experiences, both good and bad.

7. Manage the selection and implementation processes carefully. Identify a lead physician and a multi-disciplinary task force within your practice to manage both your vendor selection and implementation. A physician champion is



essential. Seek external expertise when you need it. If you ask a member of your administrative staff to take on additional responsibilities related to IT, temporarily delegate some of his/her functions to another employee so there's time to do the job right.

Remember that IT is a tool, not a solution. People, not computers, will make the experience of selecting new technology a positive or a negative one for your practice. Good luck!

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