

Determining Practice Readiness for Health IT Adoption

Health IT offers the potential of significant benefits. Yet this technology is merely a tool to redesign existing workflows around better information management. Introducing a new and unfamiliar tool is often frustrating. Successful practices credit their success to several critical factors: open communication; careful planning; realistic expectations (and budget); a detailed evaluation of available product offerings and a practice-wide commitment to success. An expanded explanation of these factors is outlined below.

Communication:

The success of any large project (especially one that is challenging, time consuming, stressful, and will cause change in almost every aspect of the practice) depends on effective communication. All partners and staff must clearly understand the goals and challenges of the undertaking and be able to express their concerns from the outset.

A series of honest conversations is helpful in gauging initial support, allaying fears, identifying and dealing with staff concerns (for example: “Will I still have a job when this is over?” or “How will my job change?”) as well as building consensus. This lays a solid foundation for collaboratively addressing emerging problems. If you do not currently have a set of practice goals relevant to daily activities, it is helpful if the practice identifies such goals together. These will be useful when you evaluate the fit between the various Electronic Medical Record systems and your practice.

Consistent and ongoing two-way communication of both successes and challenges is vital to an informed decision making process. Effective communication limits future surprises and backtracking with parties who are critical to project success.

Commitment:

Given the significant change caused by Health IT adoption, and ensuing stress to your practice, obtaining commitment from partners, staff and outside stakeholders is critical.

Commitment must be based on a shared vision of how this project contributes to your clinical and practice management goals and an agreement to face problems, challenges, and petty annoyances together. A common mistake is viewing Health IT adoption as merely a technical issue, and offloading it to a “techie.” In truth, the process is mostly about how you will use your new tools to change the process providing care. This will touch every aspect of your practice. The project team should include clinicians, office staff and a technical support person (either in-house or a consultant). The decision group must continue to involve staff in decision making (for example by collecting input on desired functionalities) and make course corrections based on staff input.

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Realistic Expectations:

As with any significant project, Health IT adoption involves a significant investment of time, resources and money. The simple promise of a “plug and go” product bringing immediate improvements in efficiency and return on investment is often illusory. The true benefits of information technologies do not manifest themselves with the placement of the infrastructure in the practice, but with its use.

Practices with realistic expectations do better at facing potential problems. They anticipate the time and effort the project demands, and better grasp what functionalities they can initially incorporate into their practice. They are more likely to experiment and create workarounds around emerging problems to get the most out of their product.

Strategic Planning:

A strategic plan establishes practice goals and objectives and identifies resources and tactics necessary to achieve them. A good strategic plan includes project goals, objectives and measures for success. It also includes a detailed anticipated budget for the project; identifying funding sources, vendor charges and internal costs. The budget should break the project down by tasks and list task-specific costs. The strategic plan should identify physician and staff leaders, implementation team members, and any additional resources (both internal and external) necessary for project success. It must have an implementation timeline, and should identify the criteria by which you will evaluate various Health IT systems (such as functionality, cost, vendor support, etc.).

Health IT System Evaluation:

When evaluating a vendor, attention should be paid to their dedicated support resources for training, tool customization, and ongoing customer support? You should also try to determine how well the vendor’s promised implementation schedule fits with the experiences of other practices that have purchased from this vendor.

In looking at the product itself, the fit between product functionalities and your practice needs must also be addressed.

- If your practice does not have the technical resources for on-going support, does the vendor offer an Application Service Provider (ASP) or third party support solution that allows you to outsource technology and support?
- Will the system interface with your practice management system and other key systems in your practice, or external to it (e.g., labs, pharmacy, hospital)?
- Does the flow and content on the screens align with your desired workflows or can they be easily tailored as part of the system implementation?
- If all providers within the practice have differing workflows, common orders and charting approaches, can the system be easily tailored to support these variances?

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- Does the system support the disease registry functions for the programs and studies within your practice?
- Does the system support the triggers and reminders for preventive care that your practice wishes to manage?
- Are the decision support tools you need supported by the system (e.g., care plan templates, clinical guideline verification, and protocol reference)?
- Can the system support the level of patient education and communication you envision (e.g., graphic trending data for easy patient understanding, patient entered health histories, email, automated test results letters and reminders)?
- Can the system extract and electronically transfer data as needed by your practice for referral management, compliance reporting and participation in pay-for-performance and other programs? With what data exchange certification standards does the system comply?
- Does the system support the level of security needed to support your plans for remote processing, data transfer and external access?

The vendor should also be able to tell you if they have obtained certification from Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT).

Preference for funding new acquisitions will be given to applicants who select systems most in line with CCHIT functionality, security and interconnectivity criteria. (For a complete list of the criteria documents developed by CCHIT please see: www.cchit.org/work/criteria.htm.) Additionally preference will be given to systems which incorporate disease registry functions, decision support tools, reminders for preventative care and industry-standard electronic data transfer capability.

Finally, you must obtain a clear understanding of the costs of the system you are considering. Such costs would include those for hardware, software, network infrastructure, licensing, connectivity fees, implementation, interfaces, data conversion, product maintenance and support. Only after getting an accurate cost estimate, would you be able to create a realistic project budget.

Implementation Plan:

After selecting a system and signing a vendor contract, the practice should finalize their strategic plan and create an implementation plan to deal with the tactical issues of the implementation process.

In addition to the components of the strategic plan (listed above) the implementation plan should assign specific people with the responsibility for specific implementation tasks. It should define how initial workflow changes will be carried out. Additionally, the implementation plan should determine how existing data will be transferred to the new system (quantity of data, and timelines for transfer) and the resources to be dedicated to this process. It should also include contingency plans for each step of the process and plan the steps necessary for going live.