

5 Tips for buying Electronic Medical Record Software

So, you've decided to purchase Electronic Medical Records Software (EMR) for your practice. Where do you start? There are literally hundreds of vendors to choose from, offering so many different options and conflicting information. How do you know you'll be getting the right solution for your practice? What questions should you ask? Here are a few things to consider before making your purchase.

Keep in mind that you're likely to have your EMR for a long time. It's very difficult, if not impossible, to migrate your clinical data from one EMR to another. While no vendor can guarantee that they'll be around in 5 or 10 years, you should do some due diligence on them. Every day I talk with practices that use an EMR vendor that is out of business, software that is not being updated or software that is not being supported very well. Do they have the financial resources to grow and expand their development and support staff? Insist on seeing current financial statements. This is easy with a public company – much of their financial information will be online. Private companies, however, might not be inclined to share information. Get your CPA to take a look at the reports. They should be able to point out any potential red flags.

Find out how many clients the company has. What is the typical size medical practice that they work with? Do they have many clients in your specialty? A two doctor pediatric practice is much different than a 25 doctor orthopedic clinic. In the end, you want to be comfortable that your vendor is going to be around to upgrade and support your EMR for a long time.

You should plan to add functionality every year to your EMR. Most practices start out simply wanting to get rid of their paper charts. Keep in mind that this is only the first step in implementing an EMR. Practices that achieve this, but don't take the next step are shortchanging themselves and not getting the full value out of their EMR. EMR's are capable of formulary checking, lab integration, speech recognition, integrated faxing, clinical data analysis and medical equipment integration. While you most likely won't implement all of these right from the start (and you shouldn't), plan on doing two things: First, look toward the future and plan accordingly. Make sure your vendor has the ability to provide the features you will want one, two or five years from now. They should be ready to do them today. I recently spoke to a practice that has been waiting for a lab integration for 6 years. Be very leery of promises that the vendor will have a feature "very soon". Second, think of getting an EMR as a series of phased implementations rather than doing everything at once. Whether it's integrated faxing, ePrescribing or integrating that new piece of equipment, you should always be striving to increase productivity in your practice. There will be continued pressure on reimbursement; using technology to become more efficient can help offset declining reimbursements.

Understand how much training you are getting with your purchase. Is it in a classroom, on-line or on-site? How much training did similar practices get and was it adequate? Talk to those practices. Who does the training, are they qualified, and are they available to provide

help when your system goes live? If you need additional training time, you can most likely negotiate a better rate before you sign on the dotted line. How much staff time will training take? Keep in mind that you'll have to consider everyone's downtime: doctors, nurses and other support staff. If everyone is not committed to putting the time in (and juggling the backlog of work that comes with time away from everyday tasks), you should seriously consider whether it is the right time to purchase. No one wins when a practice purchases an EMR and then fails to implement it properly.

Is your EMR ready for pay for performance, discrete data, outcomes management or data mining? More than ever before you'll need to have these capabilities at your fingertips. Being able to do clinical data analysis is one of the holy grails of implementing an EMR and it should be a goal of your practice. Be aware that not every EMR is set up to achieve this. If the EMR you're considering cannot handle sophisticated data management, you may not be able to take advantage of one of the biggest benefits that implementing an EMR has to offer.

What type of support can you count on when something breaks? (And it will.) What are your vendor's contractual responsibilities? How quickly are typical issues resolved? How are updates to the software handled? Talk to other users and ask them about the support they receive. Have they had "okay" support or "beyond the call of duty" service? Talk to the vendor's support staff. Make sure you are comfortable with the level of support you will receive because every hour your EMR is out of service is money out of your pocket.

Ready? Take a deep breath, roll up your sleeves and get ready to do a bit of thinking, planning, analyzing and "kicking the tires and looking under the hood" of your EMR candidates. Armed with inside knowledge, you'll be right track to EMR success.

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