

How to Choose or Change an Electronic Health Record System

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ABSTRACT

Nurse practitioners across the United States use or are about to use electronic health record (EHR) systems while having minimal input into EHR purchase decisions. The EHR system can affect provider and patient satisfaction, reimbursement, and other aspects of practice. Most EHR planning tools focus on hardware and software needs, rather than the process used to identify the right product; however, the EHR may fail if an inappropriate process is used. Ten elements essential to purchase and implement an EHR system and the steps to take if the current EHR does not meet practice needs are reviewed.

Keywords: electronic health records, health informatics, job satisfaction, meaningful use, nurse practitioners

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Nurse practitioners (NPs) in all specialties either are using or are about to use electronic health record (EHR) systems. Office practice EHR usage has increased by more than 60% since the government instituted incentives for EHR use in 2009, yet fewer than 20% of NPs report that EHR systems function well.^{1,2} Decision makers must choose from 1 of over 860 ambulatory EHR vendors or over 275 inpatient EHR vendors, and many NPs find themselves struggling to overcome problems in systems that were not designed or purchased with input from clinician end users.^{3,4}

EHR KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING

In 2013, only 54% of graduate-level nursing programs identified informatics in their curricula, however, current NP programs must follow agency guidelines for EHR competency in order to achieve and maintain accreditation.⁵⁻⁷ Although NP use of EHR is increasing, many NPs may not feel they have enough preparation or experience to participate in decisions related to the purchase of new EHR systems and the evaluation of systems already in use.

Excellent information is available online from government and professional sources to help NPs achieve appropriate informatics competency. The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology provides multiple training resources for those at any level of EHR

competence. Resources are also available from the Health Information Management and Systems Society and the American Medical Informatics Association (see [Table](#) with Information Links).

PROJECT PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

A basic understanding of project management methods and techniques is necessary for NPs before EHR selection and implementation. General knowledge of this topic can be easily acquired via government and professional organization web sites. The project's scope must be well-defined so that only those things that are entailed in the project are addressed. Required resources include both the people and the equipment that will be needed to achieve project success. Enough time must be allotted for planning, setup including training and data entry/transfer, and implementation; this must always include reductions in patient load. Sufficient funds must be allocated for the project, including hardware/software costs, reduced revenue during implementation, added personnel costs, and increased utility costs for Internet access and electricity.⁸⁻¹¹ In addition, the project team should strive to make evidence-based decisions, rather than gathering evidence to confirm decisions based on anecdotal knowledge of EHR systems. The evidence should be objective and gathered by those inside the organization rather than by external actors, such as vendors.¹²

Table. Information Links

Education & training

<http://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Legislation/EHRIncentivePrograms/index.html>

<http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals>

<http://www.himss.org/resourceLibrary/TopicList.aspx?MetaDataID=1719>

<http://knowledge.amia.org/>

Project planning & management

<http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/faqs/EHR-implementation-plan-steps>

<http://www.hrsa.gov/healthit/toolbox/RuralHealthITtoolbox/Project/index.html>

Strategic planning

<http://managementhelp.org/strategicplanning/>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/davelavinsky/2013/10/18/strategic-plan-template-what-to-include/>

Consulting

<http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/rec-highlights>

http://www.hcplive.com/publications/mdng-primarycare/2009/Feb2009/PC_EHR_consultant

Work flow

<http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/faqs/ehr-workflow-redesign>

<http://www.healthdesign.org/clinic-design/design-recommendations>

Request for proposal

<http://www.healthit.gov/node/891>

http://www.stratishealth.org/documents/HITToolkitclinic/1.Adopt/1.3Select/1.3Request_for_Proposal.doc

Legal terms

<http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/implementation-resources/ehr-contracts-key-contract-terms-users-understand>

Resources for examining vendors should be created in advance of the first team meeting.

Choose Internal Team Members Wisely

The project team should consist of practice leaders and representatives of each level of the practice who will become champions/super users. Although it is helpful if team members have prior knowledge of and familiarity with EHR systems, their most important characteristic should be interest in successful implementation of the best EHR system available.

Acquire Necessary Resources

Necessary human resources include use of a Regional Extension Center¹³ or a consultant with experience in implementing EHR in similar practices. The choice of a consultant requires careful consideration, including recommendations from prior clients or employers, as it is vital to engage the right person for this position. The consultant should have formal training and/or certification in clinical informatics that relates to the practice setting.

A careful examination of current equipment must be performed before the vendor search. Most EHR systems are available via the “cloud”; in other words, the practice will not need to purchase servers because the application will be accessed via the Internet. This allows for the use of current office-based devices as well as mobile devices. When appropriate security measures are in place, providers can safely access and amend patient records from any location where Wi-Fi is available on any Internet-enabled device.

Internet capability requires appropriate “bandwidth” to accommodate all users in the practice location. Bandwidth can be compared with a highway; the number of cars that can travel on a highway without traffic tie-ups is dependent on the size of the highway. If the practice does not purchase enough bandwidth, the network will “go down” whenever too many users try to access the EHR or large amounts of data are transmitted by users.

Backups for both the Internet connection and the EHR system itself must be in place to avoid practice downtimes. The EHR vendor should provide access to a mirror EHR if main servers go down, and a scaled-down version of the EHR

THE 10 MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF EHR PLANNING

Develop a Strategic Plan

A formal statement defining the purpose of the EHR purchase and an outline of the proposed strategic plan should be developed. These documents can be amended as necessary after the team is formed.

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