Choosing the Right EHR Vendor in 2014 and Beyond

Software goes through iterations as a natural part of its lifecycle, and EHR technology is no different. Beyond its initial implementation, EHR software undergoes updates, patches, and upgrades to ensure that the system is functioning appropriately and efficiently for end-users. The continuous nature and development of EHR technology should lead EHR adopters to consider the longevity of both the software and vendor they are choosing, which are in many cases one and the same.

Given the numerous changes to the EHR Incentive Programs and EHR certification criteria, the EHR selection process of choosing the right EHR vendor and software is worth revisiting.

The following areas are just a starting point. Based on the end-goals of a clinical practice, other EHR requirements will factor in to the EHR selection process. Accountable care and value-based payment models require care coordination and patient engagement tools that some providers will find little use for. Additionally, not all providers are eligible for the EHR Incentive Programs, so EHR certification for meaningful use pales in comparison to a product being more customizable for their specific environment.

Here are several factors healthcare organizations and providers ought to consider before making their decision:

**Costs of Ownership**

How much does and will it cost? That question is likely foremost in the minds of those decision-makers tasked with justifying the purchase of a particular EHR technology. Cost, however, extends beyond the price tag assigned to an EHR system.

Certain kinds of EHR software require certain kinds of hardware, interfaces, networking, training, and go-live support resources. Until EHR purchasers account for all of these additional costs and fees, the total cost of an EHR system cannot be determined. If a health system, hospital, or physician practice has its sights set on meaningful use, costs for connecting to a health information exchange (HIE) or similar health information networks (HINs) should also factor in.
Before signing a contract with an EHR vendor, healthcare organizations and providers would do well to seek legal advice to ensure that they are getting what they are paying for and no less.

**Return(s) on Investment**

Generally, return on investment (ROI) falls under the category of cost, but the presence of various incentive programs, namely the EHR Incentive Programs, provides a unique opportunity for eligible providers to receive federal funding through the meaningful use of certified EHR technology (CEHRT). The amount of these incentives, however, depends on when an eligible hospital or professional begins their meaningful use journey. As such, if a vendor cannot deliver their products and services within tight windows, EHR adopters stand to lose dollars.

Similarly, many EHR technologies come with practice management functionalities tied to billing and reimbursement. If the EHR system improves clinical efficiency but leads to poorly managed claims and denials, then the whole organization is not benefiting from the EHR adoption.

**Usability and Customization**

No two clinical settings are exactly alike even in a single health system, so one size definitely does not fit all. Clinicians, physicians especially, are sensitive to changes in their workflows and some of these workflows vary dramatically depending on a provider’s specialty. To ensure that all EHR users benefit from the selected EHR technology, adopting organizations need to look closely at the user-friendliness of the technology as is and opportunities for customizing the EHR to suit the needs their providers.

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) has identified several specific areas worthy of attention:

- Understand if and how a vendor’s product will accomplish the key goals of the practice. Test-drive your specific needs with the vendor’s product. Provide the vendor with patient and office scenarios that they may use to customize their product demonstration.

- Conduct a site visit. Pair up practice manager with practice manager, physician with physician and ask about workflow changes.

- Consider whether you will replace your practice management system and how you will handle the conversion or interface.

**Vendor Reputation, Support, and Availability**

Here today, gone tomorrow: The number of EHR vendors and products has decreased since the EHR Incentive Programs transitioned from Stage 1 to Stage 2 Meaningful Use.
Not to name names, but some companies and technologies present in 2011 are no longer in existence in 2014.

Because of new flexibility rules in 2014 and 2015, eligible providers have no less than three options for meaningful use reporting year in 2014 using a mixture of 2011 and 2014 Edition EHR certification criteria to achieve meaningful use and avoid penalties.

In this dynamic environment, EHR adopters must know what they are getting and when they are getting it. A taxed EHR vendor community is one of the major reasons behind changes to meaningful use over the next few years.

If EHR data migration is necessary, the responsibilities and costs for moving data should be well-established before these activities are scheduled to occur. If EHR adopters are choosing a product because of meaningful use, they should get assurances from the EHR vendor that the latter will continue seeking certification and compliance with future EHR certification criteria.

Privacy and security are two criteria essential to not only surviving a meaningful use audit but also avoiding fines for HIPAA violations. EHR vendors need to be able to document their EHR certification as well as their product’s privacy and security capabilities.

Source:

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