BEST PRACTICES:
Ten Best Practices for Selecting EHR Software
Introduction to EHR Software Selection

Your degree is in medicine, not computer science. Why then are so many physicians finding themselves focused on software these days? Government, payers and market forces are all pushing physicians to implement Electronic Health Records (EHR) software. In this brief guide, we’ll review ten best practices for selecting EHR software. Afterwards, you’ll be ready to start your software search in earnest. At that point, check out our EHR Market Map and EHR Feature Checklist and Comparison Tool.

Ten best practices we’ll cover:

1. Take ownership of selection process
2. Think big, start small and grow quickly
3. Get the right EHR for your specialty
4. Integrate billing and scheduling
5. Assess ease-of-use carefully
6. Ensure strong support and maintenance
7. Pay close attention to vendor viability
8. Be realistic about your budget
9. Understand your deployment options
10. Know the ARRA qualification criteria
Take Ownership of the Selection Process

Your EMR software will impact how you practice medicine, so this is not a process that should be delegated to back-office staff or the local "computer guy."

While your staff should play a key role in selection, this process demands medical expertise and leadership that only the physician can provide. What if your computer guy selected a system based on an underlying database he liked, but failed to recognize that the system forces you into rigid workflows that change how you interact with your patients?

Take ownership of the selection process to avoid buying the wrong EMR.

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**TAKING OWNERSHIP**

- Build your evaluation team
- Set a timetable and deadlines
- Detail the key tasks and steps
- Prioritize your requirements
- Make the final call

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Implementing an EHR can require a big change in how you run your practice, especially if you are currently using paper charts. This isn’t a bad thing; in fact, an effective transition to an EHR will make your life easier. However, this type of change is a lot to swallow in one bite.

We recommend that practices “Think big, start small and grow quickly.” That means buying into a big vision of how effective you will become by using the EHR. At the same time, it means accepting that you won’t realize that vision overnight. Instead, plan out a modular deployment of EHR functionality. Make sure to succeed at each step before moving to the next. Keep up the pace to realize your vision.
Most EMR products are designed to serve a wide range of medical practices. Others are designed for specialties. There are benefits and drawbacks to each approach.

The narrow focus of a specialty EMR vendor allows them to design their systems around the unique needs of physicians within their target market. For example, an OB/GYN EMR would have special screens designed for *ante partum* visits. This results in a more familiar workflow for the specialist and less customization of the software.

At the same time, specialty vendors may be challenged to generate enough revenue to support the wide range of ongoing development required by client demand, government mandates and device integration. Ask these vendors how they will meet ARRA requirements.

Large, broadly-focused vendors may have more resources and broader reach, but may not offer specialty features and workflows. Ask the larger, more generic vendors how they will meet your unique requirements and request references from customers within your specialty. The best vendors will have a well-developed library of templates for your specialty.

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Integrate Billing and Scheduling

Consider how you want your system to support medical billing and patient scheduling. Do you want all of these functions in one complete suite, or should your EHR interface with your existing systems? There are advantages to managing clinical and practice management functions in a single system. For example, an integrated E&M coding function can help physicians develop more accurate claims during the encounter, reducing the need to "down code" or have staff scrub the claim later. Meanwhile, health alerts made available during scheduling ensure a higher quality of care and patient compliance. On the other hand, many practices have already made significant investments in their existing practice management systems or third party billing services. Integration may suffice.

Download: EHR Feature Comparison Checklist
Assess Ease of Use Carefully

Medicine is complex enough without software making things more difficult. Therefore, it's critical to find a system that makes each encounter easier, not harder. The system must be highly intuitive and easy-to-use.

The simplest way to evaluate ease-of-use is to carefully assess a demo of each EHR you consider. Try to manage a common process such as documenting a frequent diagnosis. Did you figure it out right away? These days, the right software should make it easy. Features that can augment ease-of-use include on-line help functions, tablet or stylus interfaces and voice recognition. Ease-of-use will be especially important when staff turns over and you need new employees up-to-speed quickly.

ASSESSING EASE OF USE

- Does the navigation make key features easily accessible?
- Do field labels and content “speak your language?”
- Are colors and visual elements intuitive and easy on the eyes?
- Do all screens share a common organization and set of styles?
- Is contextually appropriate help available in the system?
The support and maintenance you receive is just as important as the software. Leading vendors provide support 24 hours a day / 7 days a week. You might need weekend support if you work like many physicians, and you might want nighttime support too, even if only while reviewing charts. Consider also how support is delivered. Are you up for talking to foreign call center staff? Do you want help on-site? And remember, when it comes to software, support isn't just technical assistance; support often includes maintenance releases - new features, bug fixes and minor upgrades. Assess each vendor's track record in delivering consistently high quality new releases of their software. After all, you'll likely pay for them annually.
Pay Close Attention to Vendor Viability

An EMR isn’t all you're buying. You're also entering into a long-term software vendor relationship. It's critical to assess the software company's viability - not just if they survive, but how... Sure, healthy margins in the software business keep most established vendors afloat, but what about the vendor's "strategic viability" in a market that is poised for dramatic consolidation? Can and will they invest in new development? Will they continue to meet regulatory requirements and support new standards? Will they sell out to a larger company that soon thereafter "sunsets" their product? All of these outcomes could have big implications for you. Make sure you assess the vendor's reputation, financial well-being and their vision for the future.

VIABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

- How long has the company been in business?
- What is the product development roadmap?
- What are their plans to meet ARRA criteria?
- Is the company growing or just sitting still?
- How often are releases made available?

Download: Assessing Software Vendor Viability
Be Realistic About Your Budget

With EMR prices ranging from $1,000 to $100,000, you can quickly narrow down your software search based on price. However, screening by budget upfront will limit your ability to find the right system. While software does not have to be expensive to be good, never buy on price alone. The more sophisticated buyer will consider the value of the system - as measured by return on investment - rather than thinking in absolute dollars. More expensive systems typically meet the latest standards (e.g. ARRA, CCHIT), offer more sophisticated features and integrate with third party devices or hospital systems. They may also include very sophisticated decision support protocols to standardize care across large groups or delivery networks.

WHAT GOES INTO A BUDGET?

- Software license fees
- Support & maintenance fees
- Setup & implementation fees
- Hardware & networking costs
- Per-claim or transaction costs

Download: Apples-to-Apples Pricing Calculator
"Deployment model" refers to where the software is installed and how it is accessed. There is a substantial shift underway in how software is deployed, so understanding the various deployment models is important.

A traditional "on-premise" system (aka "client/server") is installed on a server at your office, as well as on each user's computer. Meanwhile, in the newer "Software-as-a-Service" model (aka SaaS or “web-based”), the software is hosted in a secure, off-site data center and users access the system through web browsers. The SaaS model is similar to using a website. There are also hybrid models, such as when a client/server system is deployed with the “server” software hosted at the vendor's data center.

The on-premise model is certainly more entrenched and familiar. However, the software market overall appears to be evolving toward the SaaS model. We find that roughly 25% of buyers prefer an on-premise program, 25% prefer a web-based system, and the final 50% are considering both deployment methods. Each deployment model will have unique advantages and challenges, so it's important to fully understand each.

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Know the ARRA Qualification Criteria

As a result of the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), healthcare providers can take advantage of the $51 billion that the bill allocated to the health care industry, $19 billion of which will be used to incentivize medical practices to adopt and implement EHRs.

In December 2009, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) released documents shedding light on what physicians and hospitals must do to qualify for EHR incentive payments under the ARRA. To qualify for incentives, hospitals and physicians must be using "certified EHR technology" in a "meaningful manner.”

Be sure to review the roughly twenty five criteria included in these documents. As you research EHRs, talk to each software vendor about how their system addresses these functional requirements. Moreover, ask the vendor what steps they are taking to meet ARRA requirements. Many EHR vendors will guarantee ARRA compliance in their software license agreement.

"...physicians must be using ‘certified EHR technology’ in a ‘meaningful manner’."
Next Steps for Your EHR Software Search

Now that you have a sense of the ten best practices for selecting an EHR, it’s time to dig in deeper by:

- Developing a project timeline
- Understanding the EHR market landscape
- Determining what features you need
- Getting up-to-speed on ARRA criteria
- Starting to build a “short list” of EHRs

We’ve highlighted some of our most popular resources on the right. You can download these documents and tools from our website.

Good luck with your search and feel free to call for advice: 1-800-918-2764.

MORE HELPFUL RESOURCES:

**Market Map:**
Download our “Guide to Understanding the Ambulatory EHR Market”

**Technology Primer:**
Download our “Is SaaS Right for Your Practice?”

**Requirements Guide:**
Download our “How do I qualify for ARRA Funds?”

**FastStart Consultation:**
Talk to one of our experts to build a “short list” of EHRs
Want Expert Help Building Your Short List?

Software Advice - the website and the people behind it - is dedicated to helping software buyers find the right software for their organization. Our expertise, in-depth research and easy-to-use website are made available free through the sponsorship of hundreds of software vendors.

Our FastStart Consultations will jump start your software search, saving you weeks of research. A 15-minute phone conversation will get you headed in the right direction and there is no obligation.

“Thanks so much for getting me started on the right track. The prospect of making this kind of investment is overwhelming, and I didn’t have any idea where to start. I think your service is invaluable. Thanks, again…”

Lori Westin
Denver Nephrology

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FastStart Consultation

1 Tell us about your practice & needs

2 Our experts tap their brains & research

3 We send you the perfect “short list”

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Or call 1-800-918-2764