

EMR Buyer's Guide: Considerations for Practices Evaluating EMR

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When it comes to electronic medical record solutions, not all EMR products are created equal. Often the biggest challenge a practice faces is figuring out what to look for when evaluating a potential product and vendor. This paper provides a comprehensive EMR Buyer's Guide Checklist to help you better evaluate product features and vendor capabilities when determining which EMR solution is right for your practice.

Before you even begin examining vendors and their products, however, you may want to consider some initial steps to select the best EMR for your practice with the greatest opportunity for implementation success. Creating an EMR selection team to guide the implementation process; setting specific and measurable goals to maximize your return on investment; and developing a criteria list to assess a potential EMR system's capabilities in meeting your needs will help prepare you for a successful implementation. These steps are explained in more detail in the white paper, "Critical Success Factors for Practice-Wide EMR Implementations: Ten Steps to Maximize ROI," available at www.misyshealthcare.com/resources/whitepaper.pdf.

The EMR Checklist - A Tool to Help Evaluate EMR Products

In order to equip yourself with the knowledge you need to make informed decisions regarding the EMR solution that's right for you, you should understand the various capabilities of EMR products. The following EMR Checklist contains some of the more important factors you should consider when deciding whether or not to give a vendor and their product a second look. Keep in mind that a vendor's appearance on paper is only part of the evaluation process. Be sure to ask each company for a demonstration of their product, and be sure it is, or can be, customized for your specialty and the way you do business.

- 1. Workflow Efficiency:** Does the EMR have a flexible configuration that won't hinder my current workflow?
- 2. Specialty Content:** Does the EMR system have clinical content tailored for my specialty? How much customization will it require, if any?
- 3. User Flexibility:** Does the vendor mandate that every clinician document the same way using templates, or can some clinicians continue to dictate?
- 4. Implementation Flexibility:** Is the EMR sold modularly, or does it need to be purchased/implemented as a set package? Can I add functionality later as my needs grow?
- 5. Clinically-Driven Product Design:** Was the EMR system developed with input from actual clinicians - physicians, nurses and other caregivers?
- 6. Return On Investment:** Can the EMR help generate revenue for my practice, reduce inefficiency and help me provide excellent patient care?
- 7. Product Integration:** Will the EMR work with my existing practice management system? Does the company sell a practice management system, as well, so I can take advantage of an integrated system?
- 8. Installation, Training & Support:** Does the vendor install their systems? Provide in-depth, on-site training to the practice? Have a dedicated support team available after installation is complete or offer other value-added services?
- 9. Vendor Stability:** Will the vendor be around to support me in the long-run? Is the vendor a stable, profitable, growing company? Does the vendor have other EMR clients in my specialty?
- 10. Commitment to Product Development:** What is the company's annual research and development (R&D) budget? Will the functionality and feature-set of the EMR continue to grow? How frequently does the company release updates/new versions of the product and do I have to pay for these separately?

Workflow

The best EMR solutions don't completely change the way your practice runs - instead, they are flexible enough to fit into your existing workflow while also improving, streamlining and smoothing the rough edges in your work processes.

Consider how your practice works and look for an EMR solution that contains features that can best help improve your office's workflow. Examples of features might include:

- The use of specialty-specific templates to quickly record chart notes
- Electronic patient check-in to improve efficiency
- Electronic results sign off to save staff time and allow quicker turnaround for the patient
- Real-time access to patient charts, day or night
- Instant messaging to improve office communication (especially beneficial for practices with multiple locations)
- A flexible transcription tool
- A customizable patient summary screen that lets you view data the way you want to see it

Content-Rich and Tailored to Your Specialty

Some systems come equipped with templates specific to your specialty, reducing the amount of manual data entry required to get the system up and running. Others don't. It's important to keep in mind how much time you and/or your staff want to spend customizing your system when evaluating products.

Be sure to ask the vendor if their templates were created with input from clinicians in your specialty. Further, ask vendors if other users of their product trade or sell their templates - another option that can save you customization time.

Some systems are not specialty-focused. They may not offer templates tailored to your specialty, or may require you to purchase specialty-specific templates separately. Be clear on what comes with the system and be prepared to spend time or money developing the system if it is not equipped with content specific to your specialty. If you or someone at your organization is interested and has the aptitude to customize the EMR product, be sure that the kind of customiza-

tion you want to do can, in fact, be done. Further, ask the salesperson to let you test drive the customization tool and even ask other users of the product about their experience customizing the system. Some products are more user friendly than others.

Documentation Flexibility

Some EMR systems take an "all or nothing" approach with documentation. They require that every physician in the practice use only templates, and sometimes only one type of template can be used throughout the practice. This shuts out, for example, anyone at the practice who wants to continue handwriting notes or dictating. Depending on your practice's needs, you may want to look for an EMR system that allows more than one form of documentation.

The most common ways clinicians create chart notes in an EMR system include utilizing templates, typing free text on a keyboard, dictating into the EMR system via voice capture, scanning handwritten paper notes and using a handwriting recognition feature on select tablet PCs. No matter which method you prefer, a good EMR system will allow you to work the way you want.

Flexible Implementation

Change can be scary, and implementing a complete EMR system can seem like a daunting - and expensive - task. Consider your practice's needs, budget and capabilities when researching a vendor's implementation options.

For example, do you need an entire EMR solution now, or would you prefer to purchase and implement specific components incrementally? Some practices might want to add transcription or document imaging in the early phases, while waiting until later to implement point-of-care charting and charge passing. This modular approach may be more affordable, and it allows your staff the flexibility and time to master specific components before new ones are implemented. On the other hand, if your practice is on a more accelerated timeframe, a modular approach may not work you'll want to look for a vendor that can help you become fully operational from the start.

No matter which implementation option you choose, be sure to find out from the vendor if you can add functionality later as your needs grow. Can you implement more advanced features later? Can

remote sites "go live" at a later date and allow data sharing? Include in your search only those solutions that have the scalability to accommodate practice growth, additional locations and mergers.

Clinically-Driven Design

Consider EMR systems developed with input from actual clinicians: physicians, nurses and other caregivers who fully understand how medical practices operate. The best EMR providers have clinicians who help drive the direction of products - improvements, advancements and needed innovations. They also have physician groups who advise and guide product development, and a client base of physicians who are also able to provide input. These EMR providers have the clearest vision and the best understanding of what clinicians want and need. Implementing an EMR solution is a significant investment, so be sure it's going to meet your needs today and years from now.

Return On Investment

An important factor in choosing an EMR solution is finding one that can maximize your return on investment by generating revenue, reducing inefficiencies and improving patient care. A user-friendly EMR system can provide a wide variety of benefits to practices, including, for example, the ability to add another physician without adding new support staff. Growth then comes at practically no increased staffing costs.

Ways an EMR system can provide a return on investment, either financial or otherwise:

1. Eliminate costs associated with creating and maintaining paper charts
2. Reduce or eliminate chart storage
3. Increase revenue through added exam rooms as chart rooms are converted
4. Code more accurately through the use of templates and coding features
5. Add doctors without adding ancillary staff
6. Increase efficiency through streamlined processes
7. Go home earlier each day without compromising the quality of care
8. Reduce staff time spent on the chart chase and double data entry
9. Allow patients to get test results back sooner while spending less on courier fees

Integration With Another Vendor's Practice Management Software

If your goal is a seamless flow of data between your practice management and EMR systems, that is usually best accomplished when the two are completely integrated through one vendor.

However, some EMR companies will offer to write an interface so that your practice management system and their EMR system can exchange data. This is a viable and often affordable solution, but it can also create some unique challenges. For example, which vendor do you call for support if the interface experiences problems? What happens during software upgrades - will the interface continue to operate? If you're considering an interface solution, be sure to ask both product vendors these types of questions in advance.

You may also want to ask the vendors you are considering about product integration beyond the practice management system. Will the EMR allow you to share patient data across multiple medical care settings? Does the vendor have a plan that permits you to connect your practice, when appropriate, to hospitals and homecare agencies in your community, allowing you to see when other providers care for your patients? A strong EMR product will continuously evolve, not only meeting your current challenges, but addressing your future needs.

Training and Support

Perhaps one of the most important, yet underestimated, parts of an EMR purchase revolves around training and support. The best EMR vendor's job isn't done once the EMR product installation is over. Their commitment to you should continue by making ongoing support and training available via multiple delivery methods.

When you evaluate support capabilities, be sure that the EMR company has the staffing, business hours and locations to provide you with answers when and where you need them.

Training and support questions to ask:

- Is ongoing training available via several venues, including users groups, on- and off-site training, phone and Web training?

- Do you have to pay travel expenses if trainers come to you?
- Will you have to be out of the office for an extended period of time if their only training sessions are held off-site?
- Are the installers and trainers employees of the EMR company or subcontractors (possibly presenting challenges or inconsistent quality)?
- What are the hours of support? If the vendor operates in a different time zone, will they be available when you need them?
- If you need on-site support, how far will the support team have to travel?

Bottom line: Do the installers, trainers and support teams have the ability to make your life easier?

Vendor Stability

Considering the company as well as the product is important when choosing an EMR solution. You must be sure the company you choose today will still be around tomorrow to provide you with support and product enhancements.

How do you evaluate vendor stability? Ultimately, you want to partner with a stable, profitable company with a loyal customer base. Find out:

1. How long has the company been in business?
2. What are the company's recent revenues, and what have they been for the past few years? Is there a pattern of growth?
3. How many EMR clients does the vendor have?
4. Does the vendor serve other practices in your specialty? If so, how many?
5. What do the vendor's references have to say about the product? Or about the customer service?

All of these factors add up to the investment that company is making in the future (which includes yours).

Ongoing Product Development

How is the vendor you choose working to improve your EMR system so that your feature set and functionality keeps growing? A particular vendor may have been supplying an EMR product for years, but how often has the product been upgraded? Has it kept pace with new regulations, ways of doing business and technical capabilities?

One way to tell is by getting the actual dollar amount it spends annually on research and development. Top EMR companies re-invest a substantial amount of profits in their products, which means they are literally invested in you and your continued success.

Conclusion

Selecting an EMR system can be a difficult decision, but using an EMR checklist can help you compare "apples to apples" and determine the right product for your practice. Choosing an EMR system also means choosing a reliable partner, one that will be there to provide you with product enhancements and continued support. Also, consider the overall feeling you have for a particular vendor, as well as your impression of the company's executives, sales representatives and support team. The right company will have a quality product, people and a commitment to the long-term success of your practice.

