
Health Information Technology Toolkit for Family Physicians

EHR Vendor Selection and Contracting

Selecting an EHR system vendor has been compared to marriage. The intent is that the relationship be long term, involve daily contact, and require initial negotiations followed by ongoing problem-solving. Fortunately, there are a variety of tools available to help providers make sense of the vendor selection process and to make the right “marriage.”

The process of selecting an EHR product or system is inextricably linked to vendor selection. For the purposes of this summary, we will use the concept of vendor selection as a broad term that includes evaluation and selection of an EHR system or product.

Identify vendor selection resources

The Academy recommends as a first step that family physicians identify vendor selection resources that are available to them. The Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) has designated four Regional Extension Centers (RECs) in Texas to provide guidance and resources for providers seeking to implement EHRs and those wishing to qualify for meaningful use incentive payments. The Texas RECs are arranging for group purchasing discounts and negotiating service level agreements with vendors they deem to offer high value. Because the effort required to accomplish this is significant and negotiating leverage decreases as the number of vendors increases, RECs will select a limited number of EHR vendors with whom to negotiate.

The Academy suggests that family physicians consider whether joining a REC makes sense for their practices *before* beginning the vendor selection process to take advantage of the discounted pricing that they offer for a select group of vendors. Note, however, that RECs will not limit providers to vendors with whom they have contracts.

Texas RECs

- Gulf Coast Regional Extension Center (GCREC) <http://www.uthouston.edu/gcrec/index.htm>
- CentrEast Regional Extension Center (CEREC) <http://www.centreastrec.org/>
- North Texas Regional Extension Center (NTREC) <http://www.ntrec.org/>
- Texas Tech University Health Science Center <http://www.wtxhitrec.org/>

Similarly, independent practice associations (IPAs) and some hospitals may offer system selection resources and, in some cases, group purchasing capability. Before engaging in your own vendor search,

consider whether your IPA or the hospital with which you are affiliated offers resources that could influence your search.

Family physicians may want to consider an EHR selection program, some of which require payment of a fee. The Academy recommends the EHR Preparation and Selection Programs offered by TransformMED and [Welch Allyn](#). These programs are designed to guide medical practices systematically through the complex process of EHR vendor selection and through the confusing process of comparing, evaluating, and selecting an EHR vendor.

Finally, the Texas Medical Association offers EHR-selection resources to members. Visit the TMA HIT webpage at <http://www.texmed.org/HIT/>.

Familiarize yourself with the ONC's list of certified EHR products

To participate in federal incentive programs and health information exchanges, your EHR system must have a minimum set of capabilities. The Certification Commission for Health Information Technology (CCHIT) is the national clearinghouse that provides updated information about system certification requirements. The Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) determines eligibility for EHR meaningful use incentives, and oversees EHR standards and certification as they relate to incentives and information exchange. The ONC has issued final rules related to EHR system certification and maintains a continuously updated list of ONC-certified products.

ONC rule on EHR certification:

<http://healthit.hhs.gov/portal/server.pt?open=512&mode=2&objID=2887&PageID=19630>

ONC certified EHR products list: <http://onc-chpl.force.com/ehrcert>

Please note that there are several certifying bodies. Regardless of vendors' claims, certification for purposes of the HITECH incentives specifically refers to products certified under [federal rules set forth by ONC](#). Every vendor assigns a name for its product and has a way of denoting specific versions of the product. The listing of ONC-certified vendors is VERY specific. Even if a vendor is listed on the ONC-certified products list, a provider should verify that the specific version under consideration is listed.

Browse the ONC's webpage

Visit the [ONC's webpage](#). Once at this site, selecting "Search Ambulatory Products" lets the visitor browse all products to see who is listed, to search for a specific product, or to search for specific criteria a product meets. If "Browse" is selected, an extended, real-time list of all certified products appears—both complete EHR and EHR modules. Its contents are identified in Table 1.

Table 1

Certifying ATCB	ONC Certification #	Vendor	Product	Product Version #	Product Classification	Additional Software	
Who certified it?	The number assigned to this product upon receipt of ONC certification	The vendor associated with the product	Product name and link to view certified meaningful use features	Specific version of vendor's product that is ONC certified	Complete EHR or a limited-purpose module	The additional software the EHR relied upon to meet certification requirements	Add to Cart link

The link activated by clicking on the product name reveals a page listing all meaningful use requirements and checks which of these requirements this product has been certified as meeting. Review this list to confirm whether any product you are considering is certified for the particular Stage 1 criteria you want to meet and to note whether additional software would be required for that product.

This site also allows the user to select EHR modules that offer limited functionality—e.g., support reporting for specific clinical measures, tracking educational materials, etc. As you identify the complete EHRs (and/or modules) you intend to use, you can click “add to cart” for each of the chosen products. Adding to cart triggers a mechanism that sums the meaningful use criteria met by the products in the cart. If the sum of met criteria is less than 100 percent, the website enables you to search for additional EHR products that address the unmet criteria.

In the planning stage, this tool provides useful information for reviewing potential EHR products. Once the final choices of EHR vendors are made, this site enables you to add the specific EHR products selected to the cart and, if the selected products equal 100 percent, the site will provide you with the specific CMS EHR Certification ID required to attest for payment of Medicare or Texas Medicaid EHR incentive funds.

Identify practice-specific concerns

When you have identified the resources that are available to you and have familiarized yourself with the ONC’s requirements, you are ready to conduct your search. Most system and vendor selection tools suggest the following key steps.

Identify key system functions and priorities

Prior to engaging in any kind of vendor selection, providers should have a very clear and detailed understanding of system needs—this entails an assessment of where your practice is now and where you want it to be as well as consideration of such key issues as system certification requirements and internal practice needs and preferences.

As described above, to be eligible for EHR incentive payments, providers must meet eligibility criteria including the use of an ONC-certified system and achieve meaningful use. Familiarize yourself with the concept of meaningful use by visiting [the Meaningful Use Summary](#).

Once ONC-certification and meaningful-use needs have been assessed, additional considerations usually have more to do with practice preference and priorities. It is essential that the EHR implementation team create a detailed list of system functions and prioritize them based on the practice's assessment and goals.

Identify a selection committee or leaders

A vendor selection committee should be formed from members of the implementation team. For larger practices, this committee should include at least one executive member, a clinician, someone with technical expertise, and someone who has experience with contract negotiation. Smaller practices may choose to add vendor selection to the list of tasks for the implementation team or select a few key leaders in the practice to make the selection decisions. In any case, inclusion of a clinician is key to the vendor selection process. It is often recommended that the selection committee adhere to a code of conduct, specifying confidentiality parameters and rules about interaction with vendors during the selection process. Engaging in this process can help protect the practice from conflicts of interest or bias in the selection and negotiation process. It is also suggested that the EHR system selected not reflect the needs of the practice as it is today, but as it should be in the future.

Conduct a vendor search

A key component of vendor selection is research into which systems and vendors are most appropriate for the practice type, size, and location. Most providers use a combination of colleague referral, listings from professional societies or other trusted sources (such as the online service through TransforMED) and, in some cases, paid consultants who can narrow the search to the vendors most likely to have relevant products and services.

Proprietary vendor rankings from the [AC Group](#) and the [KLAS report](#) currently appear to be the largest and most used sources of vendor rating and ranking.

Generate a request for proposals

Sending out a request for proposals (RFPs) is not always required, but it can be helpful to provide information about the practice for potential vendors and to solicit consistent data from vendor proposals. Sample RFPs are available from various sources, although some providers choose to model their requests on those generated by other colleagues with similar practices. The RFP should be based on the priority list created by the implementation team in the planning stages. Again, some of the online services incorporate generation of RFPs into their programs.

HIMSS Sample RFP: http://www.himss.org/ASP/topics_FocusDynamic.asp?faid=262

Create vendor evaluation tools

To make apples-to-apples comparisons of vendors, it is helpful to generate evaluation tools for the various components of the proposals. Most vendor selection processes include the following:

- *RFP matrix* – At a minimum, it is important to create a matrix of key components of the RFP to consistently evaluate vendor responses and capabilities.
- *On-site demo* – Most practices will identify a short list of vendors that will be invited to provide on-site product demonstrations. This is an important component of the selection process as it allows key staff to experience the systems firsthand. Often, providers will generate typical patient care scenarios and ask vendors to demonstrate how the systems handle these situations.
- *References and off-site visits* –In addition to the on-site product demonstration, providers should ask vendors for references from colleagues with similar practice models, size, and location who are using the system. It is important to ask for a number of references to have a representative sample of providers, not just a list of satisfied customers. In addition to calling references, many providers make site visits to some of these practices to view the systems in daily use.

Generating a matrix to evaluate both the on- and off-site demonstrations will allow providers to compare system functionalities based on practice priorities and preferences.

Links to:

15 Questions to Ask Before Purchasing an EMR (American Medical Association)
www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/472/emr_agreement.pdf

Texas Medical Association EHR Implementation Guide
<http://www.texmed.org/Template.aspx?id=197>

Contract negotiation checklist

Practices that do not have contracting staff can benefit from EHR contract negotiation models and checklists. These generally address the timeline and process of a contract negotiation and the components of the contract, including cost, support level, ongoing modifications and other details. In addition, providers should evaluate the pros and cons of leasing or buying a system and the different models of ongoing support and payment structure.

The [Vendor Tools Table](#) summarizes some of the most relevant sources of vendor selection tools available for primary care practices.

References

1. "CHCF EMR Buyer's Guide." 2003, California Health Care Foundation.
2. "HIMSS Selecting EMR Fact Sheet." 2006, Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society.
3. "AHRQ Health Information Technology Literacy Guide." 2007, Agency for Health Care Quality and Research (AHRQ).
4. "CHCF EMR Selection Toolkit." 2007, California Health Care Foundation (CHCF).
5. "HRSA EHR Selection Guidelines." 2007, Health Resources and Services Administration.
6. "AMA 15 Questions to Ask Before Signing an EMR Contract." 2008, American Medical Association.
7. "TMA EMR Implementation Guide." 2009, Texas Medical Association.
8. McDowell SW, Wahl R, and J M. "Herding Cats—Challenges of EMR Vendor Selection." *Journal of Health Information Management*, 2003. 17(3): p. 63-71.