

Project Management for a Successful Electronic Health Record System Implementation

Implementing an Electronic Health Record (“EHR”) system to provide all the capabilities, support and benefits envisioned during the planning and selection processes for your system can appear overwhelming, but need not be. Good project planning and effective project management will help ensure your implementation success.

The key components for good implementation project planning are provided in an earlier set of materials, “Implementation Planning for a Successful Electronic Health Record System”. Key steps and tips in developing a comprehensive implementation plan include:

- ❑ Establishing an Effective Implementation Team – Pulling the right resources to assure implementation and long-term EHR success.
- ❑ Finalize EHR Goals and Priorities – Establishing a common vision for what the practice wishes to gain from EHR implementation, immediately and longer-term and communicating that vision for full practice support.
- ❑ Establish Implementation Strategies – Determining the best phasing and timing for introducing new practice users and new EHR system features and functions.
- ❑ Documenting the Agreed Strategy and Scope – Recording the reasoning and decisions in establishing the strategy and scope as a reference and reminder when temptation for “scope creep” threatens implementation success.
- ❑ Conducting Internal Planning Meetings – Working, as an internal team, through key planning issues related to resources, hardware, medical chart conversion, testing, training, etc. for the EHR implementation to ensure well-informed decisions and full-team consensus.
- ❑ Conducting Detailed Vendor Planning Meetings – Working with the vendor to align the practice’s goals, visions and planned approach with the tasks, milestones, schedules and resources of the vendor implementation team.
- ❑ Finalizing a Detailed Implementation Plan Document – Documenting the detailed list of implementation tasks that are the responsibilities of both the practice’s implementation team and the vendor’s team with assigned resources, schedules, task dependencies and milestones that will be used to manage the total implementation effort.
- ❑ Establishing Benchmarks to Measure Project Success – Setting initial “pre-EHR” benchmarks associated with EHR goals that will serve as quantifiable starting points and allow comparison to “post-EHR” measurements to show progress toward achieving practice goals.

Managing to this established implementation plan is a critical responsibility that cannot be over emphasized. Effective project management will make the difference between EHR system success and failure. The following outlines the key steps in managing your EHR implementation process to ensure project and overall EHR system success for your practice.

1. Dedicate the Right Project Manager

The project manager your practice assigns to manage your EHR implementation is the most critical component for assuring project success. This individual needs to hold authority and responsibility for executing the implementation plan, holding the vendor to task, negotiating through conflicts and developing contingency approach to overcome obstacles. An effective project manager can come from

anywhere within the practice or can be hired from outside practice; however, there are fundamental skills that the project manager should possess. These are:

- ❑ An understanding, enthusiasm and commitment for the goals of the project.
- ❑ Leadership skills to direct others and maintain a common vision for project objectives.
- ❑ The ability to communicate with staff at all levels of the practice as well as with vendors and other outside agents.
- ❑ Effective organizational skills.
- ❑ Good problem solving and analytical skills.
- ❑ Existing knowledge or the ability to quickly gain knowledge of the practice's clinical/operational goals, processes and challenges.
- ❑ The ability to delegate tasks and enlist the cooperation and/or assistance of team members and others.

The EHR project manager role cannot be accomplished in someone's spare time or in conjunction with an employee's other full-time responsibilities. For the life of the implementation, the duties of the project manager will require considerable time and focus. Therefore, if your practice plans to use an internal resource for this role, it will be necessary to reassign duties and "backfill" other practice responsibilities for the individual to ensure them adequate time for project management responsibilities.

2. Establish a Productive Project Structure

A project manager alone cannot guarantee the success of the EHR implementation. This individual needs the full support of other key individuals to ensure a continuity of mission across the entire practice, maintain the appropriate focus on project priorities and objectives, and ensure organizational support and cooperation with the project team. Key individuals include a "clinical champion", other clinicians/staff and may include the practice's Board, IPA or QIO who have a significant interest in the success or failure of the implementation due to financial and/or program specific contributions. Additionally, the vendor is a significant participant in this project management structure.

A hierarchy for decision making and escalation needs to be established. Team members will need to know their level of authority and what decisions they can and cannot make. Empowering the project team to make decisions will be the key to maintaining their involvement and moving through the change management process. Effective and timely escalation support for problem situations will help to keep the project on schedule.

3. Develop an Effective Communication Approach

Projects often fail due to a lack of coordination stemming from ineffective or non-existent project communications. The more communication about the EHR implementation plans, challenges and progress, the more support that can be rallied by others within the practice to help move the implementation forward. The most common and effective forms of communication include:

- ❑ Project Meetings promote interaction and collaboration, expedite responses to questions and issue resolution and facilitates efficient sharing of documents and other information. Project meetings should be held regularly, and should be scheduled prior to key project milestones.
- ❑ Status Reports serve as an excellent method for communicating implementation progress to both the practice leadership and the practice staff. Ideally these are prepared and widely distributed on a monthly basis.

- ❑ Project Plan Updates provide an excellent tool for tracking implementation progress by task against the initial plan highlighting areas needing special attention and support.
- ❑ Vendor Coordination is essential and requires continual communication between the practice's project manager and vendor's team leader to ensure that vendor is meeting deadlines and performance criteria, to coordinate activities and to resolve issues.
- ❑ Patient Communication Updates will keep patients informed, interested and supportive of changes as the practice moves forward toward implementation. Simple informational updates can take the form of posters or handouts to patients within the office, update letters or emails and should convey confidence and enthusiasm for the EHR system and how it will be used to improve care and service for the patients.

4. Control Project Scope and Manage Project Issues

As the project progresses and the practice begins to better understand the full potential of its EHR capabilities and the impact on organizational processes, requests may be made to modify or expand the functionality of the system. These requests may require additional resources, time and cost to fulfill and, therefore must be managed via a clear and consistent process of tracking and review.

Changes or expansion to project scope and implementation issues impeding progress must be escalated to the appropriate authority levels where informed and timely decisions can be made. Decisions need to be documented and communicated effectively to keep the project moving forward with consistent understanding of direction. Review of outstanding issues and resolution statuses should be the key point of focus in all project team and vendor meetings.

5. Manage Risk

The project manager, as well as other implementation team members, should be continually looking ahead to anticipate areas where potential risks may arise. The project manager can then, in conjunction with the team, develop appropriate mitigation or contingency plans. Identifying risk and developing mitigation/contingency plans early in the implementation process reduces the potential for delays and increased cost.

6. Manage to the Project Plan and Budget

Managing the project timelines and budget requires careful attention and management of both the overall project plan and the vendor contract.

Managing to the Project Plan

The project plan is the central tool in managing project activities and communicating progress on the project. It needs to be monitored closely and frequently and updated to reflect progress and changes in task assignments, sequencing, dependencies, scheduling and budgets. In effect, the project plan represents the implementation team members' "to do" lists. Holding team members and other staff accountable for completing the tasks and meeting the timelines documented in the project plan is critical to the successful and timely completion of the project.

Throughout the project there will be key points of completion or "milestones" based on pre-defined sequences of tasks and specific dependencies between tasks. These milestones have a significant number of dependencies associated with them, and failure to meet a milestone completion date significantly jeopardizes your ability to meet the overall project completion dates. Accordingly, it is

important to manage project team activities to ensure that tasks are completed in the appropriate sequence and on time.

There will be legitimate reasons for changing task assignments and modifying task sequencing, dependencies and timelines; however, project milestones should be modified sparingly and only after the result of significant consideration by team members and practice leadership. All changes to the project plan including changes in task assignments, sequencing, dependencies, budget estimates, scheduling and progress against project tasks must be documented. Project status should be updated regularly, incorporated into status reports and presented to team members and practice leadership on a regular schedule.

Managing the Vendor Contract

Ideally, your practice aligned vendor performance requirements in your vendor software agreement with key project milestones or deliverables. If so, it will be necessary to track vendor performance in connection with your project plan. It is important for the implementation project manager to carefully and thoroughly review the vendor contract and familiarize themselves with negotiated performance metrics and payment schedules. As discussed earlier, it is very important to meet with the vendor regularly to review progress.

It is also critical in these meetings to clearly articulate and document vendor failures to meet contractual performance goals. Use tracking logs, status reports and project schedules as supporting documentation for vendor non-performance. Continuously, monitor and approve vendor invoices and track payments to ensure that the practice is meeting payment schedules appropriately. You do not want to pay the vendor before appropriate approvals have been completed. Lastly, you will want to carefully document any mutually agreed upon changes to project scope, vendor performance requirements, deliverables or payment schedules/terms with a formal contract amendment. Verbal agreements will only lead to misunderstanding and frustration.