

For **Health Care Organizations**, the investment in an ambulatory *Electronic Health Record* (EHR) system will have a huge impact on their physician practices. It will change the way physicians practice medicine. Changing the *Practice Management System* (PMS), although not typically involving the physicians, is no less critical to the financial and operational health of the practice. If your organization is considering either a new EHR, PMS, or a combination of both, there are several key steps to consider. Following these steps will increase the probability for success. Success is measured by how well the investment meets your organization goals.

“The problem that often occurs is that only components of the complete plan are identified and followed. This can be compared to treating a patient who comes to a hospital for surgery. There are many steps that greatly affect the outcomes for the patient that happen before, during and after the surgical procedure takes place. It’s very much the same with strategic IT investments,” says Dale Eichelman, Business Development Executive for the Indianapolis-based, Somerset Health Care Team.

Here are seven steps Eichelman suggests you follow to ensure the IT investment ancillary service gives you a strong return on your investment.

1. **Clarify Your Goals** - Take the time to review the inefficiencies or limitations in your current practice. List the key reasons and goals you have for investing in the new IT Systems. Also, determine who will be the decision makers will be. If you’re considering an EHR, who will be the physician champion? Make sure the most influential people are on the selection committee.

Estimated Timeline: 30-60 Days

2. **Create a Request for Proposal (RFP)** - This is tedious but necessary step. The RFP will be created to explain to prospective vendors details about your practice, what are your goals to the IT Investment, the criterion for making a selection and timeline. The vendor will be requested to respond to information that provides a side-by-side comparison of products as well as levels of support services. The commitment of the vendor to the success of the project is as important as the product itself.

3. **Select the RFP Recipients** - There are dozens of potential vendors that have EHR, PMS and combination EHR/PMS systems. However, based upon key criterion (market share, nationally recognized third party ratings, number of implementations, service reputation, integration and price are key criterion to focus on the best vendor fit to achieve your organizational goals.

Estimated Timeline: 60-90 Days

4. **Vendor Selection** - Once you sent out the RFPs to the pre-qualified vendors and received their responses, it’s time to review their responses. The objective is to choose the top three to four vendors to schedule demos. This is a major commitment of time and must be planned carefully. Demo scenarios need to be established to fairly evaluate product workflow comparisons. Ratings forms need to be utilized. Reference checks should also be made. Now the vendors need to be ranked based upon your selection criterion. This will include product functionality, total cost, vendor characteristics, ability to address current and future organizational goals, and contractual commitments. Once you select the top two ranked vendors, additional demos may be required as well as site visits to selected clients.

Estimated Timeline: 6 Months

5. **Contract Negotiations** - After selecting a finalist and a runner-up, it’s time to negotiate a contract with your vendor of choice (VOC). Current and future costs must be carefully defined. Commitment to the goals of the project need to be put in writing by the vendor. Roles and responsibilities need to be spelled out for all parties. A vendor corporate visit may need to be scheduled. The contract term, level of service, implementation, required hardware, support services, enhancement, software source code all need to be addressed.

Estimated Timeline: 1-3 Months

6. **Implementation Management** - Once the contract has been executed, it’s critically important to continue the process of commitment by all parties to the project, timelines, deliverables and stated results. Management to this process is a full time commitment. This is where a well-defined, disciplined approach can mean the difference between success and significant failure of the project.

Additional consulting services may be required during this time to augment the client.

Estimated Timeline: 12-18 Months

7. **Change Management and Physician Adoption** - If the process has been well-defined and executed, high utilization rates, especially by providers using the EHR should be the result. This result will translate to significant improvements in the practice both qualitative and quantitative. However, this effort is an ongoing commitment. It does not end with when the system has gone “live.” In fact, at this point, a concerted effort to roll out the system to all users is underway so everyone is educated on and properly using the new system.

However, in some situations whether because of leadership changes, organizational changes, and/or other priorities, this focus changes and less than optimum use of the new system takes place and the initiative loses momentum. Situations such as this may required additional help from outside sources to get the project back on track.

Estimated Timeline: As Required

Summary: IT investments are very strategic decisions for physician practices. They must be made following a detailed process that is methodical, critical and inquisitive for all parties. There are many key criterions that must be utilized in making the final vendor decision. Once the decision is made, the process to make sure it meets or exceeds your organizations goals and return on investment (ROI) continue. The level of commitment by the client and the vendor have a direct impact on the level of results. Relationships must be fostered and mutual goals aligned. Executive commitment by both client and vendor is key, as there will always be planned or unplanned, issues with the system.

If you have a well-defined, comprehensive plan for your investment, your results and outcomes will be optimized.

Dale Eichelman is a Business Development Executive for the Somerset Health Care Team - Dale joined Somerset in January, 2008 to lead an initiative for greatly expanding market awareness and revenue performance for all professional services. He was previously a Senior Sales Executive with Allscripts from 2000 - 2008 where he played a key role in developing new business in the Upper Midwest. Dale has spent 23 years working with health systems, hospitals and physicians groups of all sizes to help them establish best practices improving patient care while saving lives and reducing costs. This has been accomplished through the successful implementation and adoption of operational, financial and clinical systems from vendors he has represented. These vendors provided advanced technology for physicians. Success was accomplished by understanding client needs, building strong relationships, and implementing strategic, collaborative plans. That same philosophy is followed as a member of the Somerset Health Care Team.