



Five Tips for a Successful EHR Implementation

Every day, organizations across the country embark on a journey to learn about, accept, adopt, and use electronic health records (EHRs) to improve patient safety and reduce healthcare costs. Such efforts are often fraught with difficulty and frustration, but that does not have to be the case. For example, **Fletcher Allen**—a 562-bed academic medical center located in Burlington, Vermont—along with help from **Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC)**—a vendor of electronic health record technology—recently implemented an EHR over 15 months, remaining on schedule and on budget, and achieving organization wide user buy-in and support for both the EHR implementation process and product.

Following are five critical tips provided by Fletcher Allen and CSC to help your organization ensure a smooth EHR implementation process.

TIP ONE-Leadership, Leadership, Leadership

"I can't stress enough how important it is to have full and visible leadership commitment to an EHR implementation in order for it to be successful," says **Sandi Dalton, Chief Nursing Officer and Senior Vice President of Patient Care Services at Fletcher Allen Health Care**. "Without both administrative and medical staff leaders taking time to participate in implementation efforts, your process is not going to work." The senior leadership of Fletcher Allen—including the chief information officer, chief medical officer, chief nursing officer, and chief quality officer—devoted a significant portion of their time to implementation planning meetings and were present and visible during all events related to EHR implementation. "The implementation was also an agenda item on every critical leadership meeting," says **Dalton**. "We talked about where we were with implementation and where we needed to be, as well as how senior leadership could support the process, remove barriers, and move the process along."

TIP TWO-Build an Achievable Plan

An implementation plan should consider all aspects of the implementation process, set realistic time frames, anticipate possible roadblocks, and allow plenty of opportunity for feedback. "The more planning you do upfront, the less work you will have during implementation," says **Dalton**. "Many organizations don't devote enough time to planning and end up reworking things after implementation starts. This can get expensive and blow your budget and timeframe right out of the water. You're going to have to put the time in somewhere. By spending it upfront, you can gain user buy-in, identify potential stumbling points, and ensure your implementation process stays on time and on budget."

TIP THREE-Involve Clinicians

Although leadership involvement in implementation is critical, it is not the only involvement necessary. Your organization must also involve clinicians in the process to ensure the resulting product and process works for them. "By clinicians, we don't just mean doctors and nurses, although they are very important," says **Dalton**. "Organizations should also involve therapists, pharmacists, dieticians, and any other providers who will be using the EHR in patient care." Organizations should gather clinician feedback and participation before, during, and after the implementation process—including them on the product selection committee, the implementation team, and any workgroups providing feedback. For example, Fletcher Allen involved 30 of their clinicians in the EHR vision and vendor selection steering committee. "These individuals helped develop the vision for how the EHR would be used in our organization and selected the vendor,"

says **Dalton**. "During that process, 2,500 of our employees participated in demos of the EHR program and helped determine exactly what would work best for our organization and workflow." (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Two clinicians using the EHR.

Because the EHR is a technology-based application, it is tempting to let information technology (IT) professionals drive the implementation process. "Ultimately, this tool is for clinicians, and so clinicians should be determining how the tool will be used and how best it should be implemented," says **Donna Schmidt, RN, MS, MBA, FACHE, CSC Partner**. "It is important to have open communication between clinicians and IT professionals to ensure that the product meets the needs of the clinicians in the most efficient and effective way possible."

TIP FOUR-Forecast and Dedicate Resources

"You shouldn't skimp on the resources," says **Dalton**. "Implementing an electronic health record is a complex process, and if you try to approach the project with limited resources, you will probably not be successful." Some things to consider when allocating resources include the following:

- Allow clinicians time in their schedule to participate in planning meetings and implementation efforts
- Allow resources for education that help spread the word about the program, its importance, and how it will improve the quality of care provided by the organization.
- Provide sufficient training to all users of the program before implementation begins
- Allocate funds to ensure there is plenty of support during implementation. This may include having on-site super users present and available to answer questions during the first few days or weeks of implementation

TIP FIVE-Prepare the organization

The introduction of an electronic health record can—and probably will—change the way your employees do their work. "This can be intimidating, and if not addressed ahead of time, can lead to lack of acceptance and participation in implementation," says **Schmidt**. "To avoid this, senior leaders must prepare the organization for change." This preparation involves educating users on why the EHR is necessary and how to use it; anticipating and addressing potential roadblocks; and allowing plenty of support during implementation to answer questions and provide direction. Fletcher Allen and CSC had 300 people trained to answer questions about the EHR program who

were available during the first few weeks of implementation. "These people—clinicians and other super users from Fletcher Allen as well as IT consultants from CSC—wore special colored shirts so that users could easily spot someone to which they could turn for help," says **Schmidt**. (See Figures 2 and 3) In addition, the organization had a fully-staffed help desk that was available round-the-clock to answer questions.



Figure 2. Support personnel in the implementation "command center"



Figure 3. A "super user" helping a clinician use the system

Although implementing an EHR is a multifaceted process, it does not have to be a scary one. Proper planning, strong leadership support, involved clinicians, and dedicated resources can all help your organization realize an effective and timely implementation that stays within your budget.