

Medical Practice Trends Podcast 11: Five Best Practices for EHR Implementation

Dr. Polack: This is Peter J. Polack, M.D. with Medical Practice Trends and in our podcast today our guest is Chris Mertens, Vice-President of the Personal Systems Group for Hewlett-Packard. Welcome Chris!

Chris M.: Thanks Peter. It's a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Polack: So our topic today is 'Five Best Practices for EHR Implementation', and we could probably make a list of hundred but it's going to depend obviously on your point of view.

So let's start off with what you consider as one of the most important best practices and that's evaluating your current use of technology and your hardware infrastructure.

Chris M.: Yeah, you really need to understand your needs, what you are looking for, how your practice operates, the style through which you want to interact with your patients and how your staff interacts with the patients and the needs of the office.

So I think a big piece is to understand your environment, your infrastructure, meaning that you have technology today, what is your network requirement and ensure that you've got the best use of the technology and the hardware infrastructure for today.

So you've got to kind of do an inventory of what you've got from a technology standpoint and use that as the foundation in which to build from.

Dr. Polack: We have kind of an interesting story along those lines. Our practice, we've got 12 physicians now. When I first joined the group we had kind of a mish-mash patchwork of consumer-level personal computers that were kind of strung along in a haphazard network and when we brought in some people with IT knowledge, it was amazing how much better equipment we could get on a professional level that was actually less expensive and more cost-effective to run and work better.

Chris M.: Yeah, it's something that I think the offices really need to think about is it's enticing when you get the Sunday circulars that have notices of fabulous consumer products at their local store but at the end of the day it may not be the best fit for them. They really need to think about the ruggedness of the consumer product versus the commercial product.

They need to think about the warranty. They may not have the right warranty to meet their needs and we really want to make sure that they are taking a look at those types of things because it's something that can be a 'got you' later on.

So consumer products may not have the best fit for a physician in the physician's offices.

Dr. Polack: There was another practice I know of that let one of the doctors make the decision about the hardware and he thought it would be great to have, again, top of the line consumer level laptops in every exam room connected to a second external 24-inch monitor, and by the time they were done, I mean they were into it for a couple of thousand dollars in each room and it really didn't help them practice any better.

On the other hand, we outfitted each exam room with more basic hardware because everything is linked on the network.

Chris M.: One of the great things is they should look for a local reseller, a local bar who can help them with those technology selections so they don't have to know everything about technology. There are, as you mentioned, experts out there that can guide them in their technology requirements and needs and help them understand what works in their environment and what doesn't, and I would just recommend that as they look at choosing the partner or reseller out there to work with, that they ensure that that reseller has some sort of healthcare certification so that the reseller can guide them in a healthcare environment, the best practices of what works and pitfalls to avoid in technology.

Dr. Polack: Okay, so the second of our best practices for EHR implementation is putting the best practices in terms of workflow processes into place at the beginning of your implementation to ensure that the transition runs smoothly from start to finish.

Chris M.: Yeah, it's all about workflow and their interaction with the patient and in the workflow it's how they move about the office, how they work with the records, what they need to be doing with that and then how the technology fits in to that workflow to ensure that they have got the right technology that meets their style and their ability to do their work, the workflow in essence, around the patients. And in doing so, they'll ensure that they've got things off to a great start and that the transition to electronic medical records environment is a smooth one.

Dr. Polack: The next best practice is minimizing the loss of office productivity during your implementation by relying on a vendor that understands the unique needs of your medical practice. You touched on this a little bit, can you expand on that a little more?

Chris M.: Yeah sure. So one of the things is ensuring that the vendor can come-in in off hours, non-peak hours, if you will, so that first is making sure the vendor can come in either after-hours, before-hours, the weekends or whatever, to do everything from the installation, the analysis etc.

So the vendor really will work around their needs and their office needs to keep the impact of the installation and the training to a minimal, and that would help them quite a bit in getting started because no one wants to shut down an office.

Healthcare is something not like a bank. Bank can close and you can use the ATM machine but a physician's office can't close to do a technology upgrade. It's just not possible.

So in this environment the vendor will work around their office productivity and will spend time with them to understand their unique requirements that they may have in the use of the technology, in their service requirements, in their knowledge of the technology and in the types of training programs that maybe required.

Dr. Polack: Well that segues nicely into number four of the Five Best Practices for EHR Implementation and that's that once a system is installed, allotting sufficient time and resources to properly train the entire staff.

Chris M.: So the one thing that I do here out there at HP we do a lot of listening to the marketplace. We have serious customer counsels that healthcare, both at the clinician's level as well as at large hospitals, and one of the things that we constantly hear is about training.

By that, meaning take the time and ensure that your office is getting trained not just initially but have the vendor come back with a plan for return visits to ensure that if you are having trouble in a particular area, it's getting addressed and that they are continuing to come back over a period of time to work with the staff and the physicians themselves in understanding the software because if someone doesn't understand it, they simply are not going to use it and then the project will die and the use of the software and hardware will fail.

So ultimately in a training plan you want to make sure you have more than the existing immediate training, that it's an ongoing training that takes place over a period of months to ensure everyone's properly trained.

Dr. Polack: Yeah, I would second that especially on the ongoing training because there are cases of practices that train people and then there's some hiccups with the actual installation or implementation of the system, and then when they go live they find that a lot of the staff has gotten rusty with their skills and they didn't really have a chance to use it in a real life situation.

Chris M.: Absolutely, and the other idea is to have someone on the staff become subject matter expert, almost a trained trainer where they become the 'go to' person in the office.

Dr. Polack: Super-users.

Chris M.: Exactly, so that the users can go and talk to someone there who maybe kind of that super user well-versed in the technology, in the software – that will really help everyone adopt the technology and the use of the software in the most efficient manner possible.

Dr. Polack: Okay, then the last of the Five Best Practices for EHR Implementation is ensuring that you have an adequate service plan. Great, now we are talking specifically of the hardware.

Chris M.: Right, so the problem we see out there is that first, if you buy a consumer product it won't have the right service plan for you. So that's one problem.

The second is to make sure that the hardware you buy has an onsite service warranty so that you are not shipping product to a depot to be repaired, and the reason that's important is twofold – the first is to protect the physician in the office from patient privacy issues. Sometimes the hard drive may fail or there'll be an issue with the computer and it may contain patient data on it, but the minute it leaves the office, there's risk of patient privacy violations. So you want to make sure you are compliant with HIPAA and patient privacy requirements. The best way to do that is with an onsite service plan.

The second aspect of it is the interruption to the office when someone has to pack up computer in and ship it out. It means there's a loss of productivity and at least in having someone come to the office to fix it, minimizing your downtime with the technology and it really ensures that the office maintains a peak level of productivity and efficiency by having the onsite service warranty.

You really want to expect almost a white glove kind of concierge-level service and they should be asking for that. It maybe cost-additive, there will certainly be a cost involved but if we go back to financing and how our physicians look at financing under some of the best practices financing enables them to bundle in even the Service Level Agreements and the service requirements or service plan into a rich environment as part of the hardware purchasing so their cost component to such a service plan would be really minimal, in fact it maybe pennies-a-day.

Dr. Polack: Okay, well Chris, thanks very much. I appreciate it.

Chris M.: Thanks for having me. It was great.