

PREPARING FOR ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORDS

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Many practices today are beginning to evaluate electronic medical record (EMR) systems as the first step in adopting this technology within their offices. The process of researching software, speaking with vendors, and implementing technological change within a practice can be very intimidating. Using the expertise of a technology partner to guide you through the process is an excellent way to reduce anxiety and accelerate successful implementation of your practice's new EMR system.

Your practice's computer network is the foundation for the EMR system. In most cases, this foundation requires strengthening to support the additional weight of the new EMR. System stability and the necessary security to meet HIPAA requirements are essential. Most EMR software vendors are not equipped to offer the customized technical services or expertise required to support your specific needs and advise you in these areas. The vendors typically focus on the installation and training processes associated with their software, and usually expect the practice (usually the practice manager) to take responsibility for meeting the technical requirements and supplying the required environment.

Each EMR vendor publishes a list of requirements for their software (often referred to as the System Environment Specifications). However, beyond the basic vendor server and workstation requirements there are many other options requiring thought and consideration. You will need to evaluate and define various other hardware components within the scope of your particular needs and practice. Some of the most common include:

- Will the EMR be server-based or web-based?
- Should you use a laptop, tablet, or slate PC?
- How will providers access patient records from outside the practice?
- What does the EMR require for an integrated fax system?
- What printers and scanners will you need?
- How much downtime can be tolerated, and what is the plan for disaster recovery?

The practice manager is typically ill-equipped to deal with the alphabet soup of computer acronyms and terminology. Preparing and supporting the network should become the responsibility of your technology partner; they can best act as your advocate and work with the software vendor's technical staff.

There are four key phases to building the computer network foundation necessary to support an EMR system. They are:

1. Assessment of the practice's current computer assets to determine what can (and cannot) be re-used.
 2. Understanding the software vendor's configuration requirements as well as the needs/wants of the providers.
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3. Developing a budget for implementation of the new network, network management and support post-implementation.
4. Coordination of the network installation to meet the software vendor's implementation timeline as well as your operational needs.

Network assessment is the most critical step, as your network serves as the backbone for all other components and drives many other decisions. It is also the simplest phase to accomplish and can be completed well before vendor selection. Often a network that appears to be running well is unable to accommodate the needs of your new EMR software. For example, workstations with insufficient memory or low disk space are often not noticed until new software arrives. Wireless security, Internet firewall, anti-virus software, printers, scanners and the current state of network health should all be inventoried. (During our assessments we sometimes find networks with little or no security, failing workstations, and spyware or malware no one knew was there).

Once the assessment is completed, it is a straightforward process to use the information and work with the software vendor to develop a budget for upgrading and/or adding components to meet requirements. This is also the time to define a network support plan to keep your network healthy and stable as you increase utilization.

The process of selecting an EMR system is not easy. Office managers and providers often feel overwhelmed with the choices and decisions that must be made—not to mention the process of adopting a new way to interact with patients and deliver care. The most successful implementations happen when the practice focuses on the EMR software selection as well as operational changes the practice must embrace. A technology partner experienced with EMR implementations can take on the responsibility of the computer network implementation details; this will allow your focus to be on the EMR software and its impact on workflows, minimizing surprises along the way that can add cost and delay success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BILL BURBANK is a Healthcare Specialist for SymQuest's Network Services group. Bill acts as a technology advocate for practices and works with EMR software vendors to ensure network readiness for the new EMR software. Bill has over 25 years of experience implementing software applications and technology solutions.

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