Practice management systems: There must be a better way!

We often look for sophisticated solutions to our business problems. But determining which solution fits best isn't always easy, and the "paralysis by analysis" bug may bite during the decision-making process — especially when it comes to information technology (IT) solutions.

Practice management systems present too many variables to make an apples-to-apples comparison. And the new world of electronic medical records does not even get close to apples-to-pears! This is because seemingly minor differences between two business processes can be critically important. Each of us views our medical practice as different — and we're right. Here are some universal questions being asked about new practice management systems:

- Are you effectively using IT to improve operations and reduce overhead?

- Does your clinical technology enhance or provide value to your physicians' daily practice operations?

- Have you identified the key technological solutions you'll need in your practice in the next three years?

- What are the current obstacles or limitations that inhibit Internet use in your practice by physicians and staff?

- What are the barriers to implementing IT in your practice?

By Rosemarie Nelson, MS

Evaluate the efficiency of your information system.

Does it live up to expectations? The information technology assessment (see page 3) can help you determine whether your practice's information system can benefit from technical assistance.

As you complete this assessment for your operation, you may find opportunities for improvement in the use of IT across your practice. The tools of IT extend beyond just your practice management system. If you believe that there must be a better way, or, if you aren't sure what to implement next, your group will benefit from a one-day, on-site information system audit. A one-day review will identify key action items that can provide an immediate return and help your group identify the next use of technology to improve operations. ▲

Information Technology Assessment

Is our information technology (IT) core to our operational infrastructure, much like the telephone system?

1. Is it always available when we are on site?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

2. Is it available after hours by remote access?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

3. Do we have a Web site?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

4. If yes, does our practice Web site provide interactive services to patients, such as appointment scheduling, prescription refills, billing inquiries and/or clinical Q & A?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

5. Do we have a written policy for need-to-know system access procedures?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

If you answered "no" to two or more of the questions above, there are efficiencies to be gained in your practice with information technology.

Our IT supports our operation effectively.
Rate each of the following.

1. Our providers have off-site access to patient information essential in quality clinical decision-making.

strongly disagree   disagree   no opinion   agree   strongly agree

2. Our practice uses an auto-attendant phone system with voice-mail to achieve optimum communications within our organization.

strongly disagree   disagree   no opinion   agree   strongly agree

3. We use telephony applications such as automated appointment reminders and/or test results reporting to provide timely follow-up to our patients.

strongly disagree   disagree   no opinion   agree   strongly agree

4. Our practice participates in our software-vendor user group meetings regularly and returns with updates to modify operations.

strongly disagree   disagree   no opinion   agree   strongly agree

5. Our system integration and/or system interfaces does not require redundant data entry across systems.

strongly disagree   disagree   no opinion   agree   strongly agree

6. Our system provides an easy-to-use query tool to create reports as needed by management.

strongly disagree   disagree   no opinion   agree   strongly agree

If you rated two or more of the questions above as "strongly disagree," "disagree," or "no opinion," your practice operations can be improved.

Would our practice benefit from the assistance of a technology consultant?

1. Do we routinely meet with our IT vendor to assess the level of system use?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

2. Do we routinely meet with our IT vendor to assess the technological status of our processing power and telecommunications efficiency?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

3. Does our organization fully use electronic data interchange (EDI)?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

   Including electronic remittance of claims?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

4. Do we know what percentage of claims payments are posted via electronic remittance?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

5. Do we annually review and assess our IT support functions by an interdisciplinary group within our organization or by an outside consultant?   ❍ Yes ❍ No

If you answered "no" to two or more of the questions above, an outside consultant with information system expertise can provide you with guidance and direction that will improve your use of your practice management system.

Can we benefit from a formal review of our use of IT to improve operational effectiveness?

1. Does our practice use all the features the application affords?   ❍ Yes ❍ No ❍ Not sure

2. Does our information system support Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) security and privacy guidelines?   ❍ Yes ❍ No ❍ Not sure

3. Have we documented our operational processes via flowchart for effective use of existing automation?   ❍ Yes ❍ No ❍ Not sure

Are you confident that your practice can answer "yes" to every one of the three questions above? If not, a formal review of your operations with a focus on your use of IT may be warranted.

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