

Eli's Rehab Report

Practice Pointers: Shop Smart -- Gather Crucial Info From Vendors, Customers

Look for these key features in your software test drive

In the last issue of Physical Medicine & Rehab Coding Alert, you read about how to find electronic medical record (EMR) software that's best suited for your rehab organization. If you've narrowed down the options, make sure to add these buyer strategies to your toolbox to ensure you're getting the best system:

- **Speak with current customers in your setting.** When you speak with the vendor, ask to speak to customers now using the software, says **Marvel J. Hammer, RN, CPC, CCS-P, ACS-PM, CHCO**, president of MJH Consulting in Denver. If you're in a small private practice, speaking with a customer in a large hospital setting won't be as helpful as speaking with another private-practice owner, she says.

Tip: Ask industry colleagues, including those on rehab provider listservs, for reviews of software they're using.

- **Investigate tech support.** When you speak with the reference, ask about software support and response time, Hammer says. No matter how good the software is, "if you can't get a call back from the support staff for two weeks while you're trying to figure out why the software isn't working like you think it should, it can be very problematic," Hammer says. You should also ask the vendor about training materials.

- **Look into extras.** Ask the vendor what features are available at an extra cost, Hammer says. You should also ask about software customization and cost, especially for items not included in the basic package, she adds.

- **Assess user-friendliness.** To get the most out of your software, it needs to be user-friendly -- easy to navigate and easy on the eyes.

Also, remember to check out the program's ability to send reports, says **Mitch Kaye, PT**, director of quality assurance for PTPN in Calabasas, Calif. "If the insurance company wants a full record, is the system able to send it electronically, or do you have to print them up and send them?"

- **Always request a demo.** You can get the vendor to discuss all the above topics, but nothing's as valuable as taking it for a test drive. In fact, this is the best way to assess user-friendliness.

Consider the screen appearance and layout, Hammer says. Look at the font size and color too.

Judge how easily you can move "from one data field location to another on the same screen," Hammer says. And test how easily you can move from one function to another, especially in routine processes, she adds.

Example: You need information from screen B for screen A. Do you have to get completely out of screen A to get to screen B, or can you enter "hot keys" to access screen B more quickly? Hammer asks.

Tip: You may be able to get a good demonstration of a product at a conference, says **Jan Rasmussen, CPC, ACS-OB, ACS-GI**, owner of Professional Coding Solutions in Holcombe, Wis.