Stamp of Approval: Getting EHR Wheels Turning with Product Certification

Save to myBoK

by Harry Rhodes, MBA, RHIA, CHPS

Establishing private-sector certification of health IT products is one of the key actions outlined by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology in the report "The Decade of Health Information Technology: Delivering Consumer-centric and Information-rich Health Care." The primary objective of certification is to increase implementation of electronic health records (EHRs) by reducing the risk of product implementation failure.

EHR Deadlock

There are many risks associated with implementing an EHR, including the costs of skilled IT support, professional expertise in work process redesign, and hardware and software, as well as staffing costs associated with EHR implementation and work process redesign. Because many physician practices have limited capital to spend on EHR solutions, the risk is too great for a large percent of healthcare providers.

An EHR system requires providers to dramatically change their office operations and clinical practices. The purchase and implementation can be financially, emotionally, mentally, and physically challenging. And there is no guarantee that the implemented system will succeed in delivering improved healthcare. Reports of failed EHR implementations have contributed to the tightening of investment dollars, increased cynicism about EHR benefits, and increased risk adversity.

Risk and uncertainty have caused an EHR adoption deadlock. Providers won't invest money and time in EHR implementations until cost and risks decrease or the incentives to invest increase. Healthcare payers and purchasers will not offer incentives to implement EHR systems unless benefits and interoperability of EHR systems are ensured. And IT vendors can't bring down costs until provider adoption accelerates.

Compare the purchase of an EHR system to buying a car. The average car buyer goes into a purchase assuming that all cars on the showroom floor meet basic safety and functionality standards. The same assurances do not exist for EHR purchasers. The current EHR marketplace is a "buyer beware" environment.

Getting the Wheels Turning

To reduce the risks associated with product selection, increase confidence in EHR purchases, and mitigate the risks of implementation failure, the federal government has been exploring various ways to work with the private sector to develop minimal EHR product standards for functionality, security, and interoperability. A private industry initiative was needed to bring together national leaders from all areas of healthcare (providers, vendors, payers, the government, standards development, and other key stakeholders).

AHIMA is one of three founding organizations that launched the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT). (The other cofounding organizations are the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society and the National Alliance for Health Information Technology.)

CCHIT's mission is to "accelerate the adoption of robust, interoperable HIT throughout the US healthcare system by creating an efficient, credible, sustainable mechanism for the certification of HIT products."[1] To carry out this mission, CCHIT needs to identify minimal requirements for portable, secure, and interoperable health information and develop mechanisms for evaluating products against these criteria.

CCHIT has dedicated itself to developing a voluntary certification process. Product certification is not intended to limit EHR innovation or restrict new entrants into the EHR market. Certification is designed to establish a workable method for establishing minimum product standards that allow EHR purchasers to evaluate EHR systems. The ultimate goals of the CCHIT EHR product certification project are to:

- Reduce the risk of HIT investment by providers
- Ensure interoperability of HIT products with emerging local and national health information infrastructures
- Enhance the availability of HIT incentives from public and private purchasers and payers
- Accelerate the adoption of robust, interoperable HIT throughout the US healthcare system[2]

In achieving these goals, product certification will accelerate EHR adoption by increasing the confidence of providers investing in HIT products.

CCHIT's Work in Progress

The scope of CCHIT's first project is to certify EHR products for physician offices and ambulatory care settings. A first-step certification process will be ready for pilot test in fall 2005. CCHIT also plans to provide a road map of future certification plans to help the healthcare community plan for next steps in the certification effort.

The work toward certification was divided into project phases. At the time this article was published, data gathering was complete for the first phase. On April 18 phase 1 deliverables were posted to the CCHIT Web site for a four-week public comment period. During that period, four "town calls" were held with representatives from health IT vendors, physicians, healthcare providers, policy organizations, and the general public.

The first public comment period ended in mid-May, at which time work immediately began on phase 2 of the interim work product. A second public comment period on the phase 2 interim work product is scheduled for July 11–August 11, 2005, with another series of town calls scheduled between July 11–25.

The beta test of the final requirements will begin in September 2005, with publication of the final requirements, road map, and launch of product certification process scheduled for December 2005.

Healthcare providers seeking to purchase an EHR system should not have to become IT experts. They should not have to recall the technological details of every EHR function and should not have to pore over information technology journals to determine if a proposed EHR technology has been tested and proven reliable. The promise of EHR certification is that the risk and uncertainty of making an EHR system purchase will be mitigated.

Notes

1. Certification Commission for Health Information Technology. "CCHIT Mission." Available online at www.cchit.org.
2. Ibid.

Harry Rhodes (harry.rhodes@ahima.org) is director of practice leadership at AHIMA.

Article citation:
Rhodes, Harry. "Stamp of Approval: Getting EHR Wheels Turning with Product Certification." *Journal of AHIMA* 76, no.7 (July-August 2005): 56-57.

Driving the Power of Knowledge