

Ten Steps to Selecting a Document Imaging Vendor

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On the road toward an electronic medical record, many organizations will need to evaluate and select document imaging systems. Because of the time and expense involved in these types of implementations, it is critical that the vendor selected be the right one for the organization. The process outlined below will give you an objective framework to use as you choose your document imaging vendor.

The success of any large system implementation depends on executive support for the project. Because a document imaging system implementation will affect virtually the entire organization, representatives throughout the organization should be solicited for active involvement in the vendor selection process. Institutional sponsors for the selection and implementation process should be identified, and executive leadership and medical staff support for the project should be obtained. Critical areas that should be involved in the selection process include: HIM, business office, nursing/patient care, medical staff, information systems (IS), and registration.

Steps Toward Vendor Selection

The vendor selection process should include the following steps:

Identify and list vendors that offer document management/imaging systems. This can be done through Internet research, vendor source lists, and recommendations from colleagues. Many vendors have their own Web sites that provide additional information. Conventions (such as AHIMA and HIMSS) are also a good source of vendor information. Also, many healthcare technology journals publish resource issues or vendor lists.

Develop a list of system functionality requirements. Interview users of the system to determine their functionality needs. Include IS functionality requirements relating to hardware, software, security, and other issues. If possible, obtain functionality lists from other facilities using document imaging as a guide. This is perhaps the most critical step in the vendor selection process, because knowing what you want from the system will shape the criteria against which you can compare the different vendors. Each department that will use the system should have input into the list of functional requirements. It is important to have a baseline understanding of document imaging applications to ensure that you are including all key functionality requirements. In addition to user functionality requirements, platform considerations should be agreed upon. IS personnel must have input into the system requirements list, because they will ultimately be responsible for supporting the system after implementation. In addition, it is important to familiarize yourself with American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and Association for Information and Image Management International (AIIM) standards related to document image capture. Do not automatically assume that the vendor is ANSI or AIIM compliant.

Develop and distribute a Request for Information/Request for Proposal (RFI/RFP) to the potential imaging vendors. Include the following in the document:

- information on your facility, including IS environment
- completion and submission instructions
- request for vendor information/vendor profile data with a complete reference list
- complete list of functional requirements
- a complete client list

Some vendors will list contact information for only a few of their clients. If a vendor claims 40 installations of the system in the vendor questionnaire section, you should ask for and obtain the contact names and numbers for those 40 sites. If a vendor does not comply, you might have reason to question this.

Develop a scoring grid to evaluate and compare responses of the RFI/RFP. The selection committee should be involved in evaluating the responses. Examples of scoring criteria could include: vendor profile (number of sites, revenue, how long in business, etc.), pricing, IS platform, and functional requirements. Each of the criteria should be weighted according to what is most important to your facility. For example, meeting the list of functional requirements may be more important to you than price; therefore, this item would be weighted more heavily than price. After you have weighted the agreed-upon scoring criteria, then you are ready to "score" each response against those criteria.

Narrow down the vendor list after receiving, reviewing, and scoring RFI/RFP responses. Ideally, the top two or three should be chosen to continue in the process, considering the time involved in further evaluation of the remaining vendors.

Invite vendors from the short list to perform on-site demonstrations of specific items in the RFI/RFP response. These demonstrations should be scripted to ensure that your key functionality requirements are demonstrated to your satisfaction. Develop a scoring grid listing what you want to see in the demonstration and have all attendees complete the evaluation form. The same evaluation form should be used for each vendor demonstration. Although you may have already seen demonstrations performed by some vendors, this round of demonstrations should be more specific to your facility's requirements.

Compare the evaluation forms to determine if any of the vendors should be eliminated. If possible, representatives of the medical staff should be involved in the vendor selection process. Key system functionalities that are most important to the medical staff, such as record retrieval and chart completion, should be reviewed by each of the final vendors. Medical staff may use short evaluation forms to help you compare vendors from their point of view.

Visit the sites of those vendors who met your requirements during the on-site demonstrations. Again, use a script to ensure that your key functionality requirements are demonstrated satisfactorily during the site visits. If possible, someone from IS should attend and speak with a physician who uses the system at the site to get his or her feedback. Provide a scoring sheet that attendees can complete during the site visit. This is a critical step to ensure that required system functionality that was successfully demonstrated actually works in a production environment. At the end of the round of site visits, compare the evaluation forms for each vendor.

Call several references for each of the final vendors. Choose sites from the supplied client list, not just the references supplied by the vendors. Create a questionnaire so you ask the same questions of each of the references, such as the success of the implementation processes, why the vendor was chosen, how they rate vendor support, or if there are any known bugs. This will give you a greater understanding of the vendors' strengths and weaknesses.

Calculate scores on each demonstration and site visit to determine the top vendor. If any concerns are identified during the reference calls, follow up on them. Again, the entire selection committee should agree on the chosen vendor. Now you're ready to begin contract negotiations.

To learn more about document image standards, visit the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Web site at www.ansi.org or the Association for Information and Image Management International (AIIM) site at www.aiim.org.

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