

# Strategic “Best of Breed” Approach Ensures EHR Success



**Meta Health Technology**

*Powerful HIM Solutions for over 30 Years*

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Federal stimulus incentives included in the 2009 ARRA HITECH act have prompted healthcare providers nationwide to accelerate their adoption of electronic health records (EHRs). However, despite the inevitability of an electronic healthcare environment, this often divisive question remains: What’s the most efficient – and effective – EHR implementation approach?

Like most questions, the answer depends on who you ask. Key hospital decision makers may advocate for or against a certain implementation approach, as they give priority to enterprise-wide EHR objectives relating to Meaningful Use, quality initiatives, regulatory reporting and interoperability. Those working on the front lines, including health information management (HIM) professionals, may have a completely different opinion, reflecting their focus on functionality needs, ease of use, and speed of implementation.

Understanding the unique needs of each function in the hospital makes for a more effective overall EHR implementation. In particular, HIM and its operational needs, which are the focus of this article, should be carefully considered prior to the selection of an EHR vendor and implementation approach.

Health Information Management functions underlie every critical hospital activity. As the facility’s information experts, HIM professionals typically know what data is coming into the hospital, what needs to be reported, and what information needs to be made available for clinical care, for regulatory compliance and for accurate reimbursement. For example, unless HIM is functioning optimally, facilities will see a growing list of “discharged-not-final-billed” accounts and corresponding delays in reimbursement. Ensuring that HIM is able to run efficiently – and that its workflow isn’t interrupted or negatively affected by EHR implementation decisions – is not simply a matter of convenience. It’s a necessity.

## Current approaches

In today’s competitive health information technology market, hospital executives find themselves facing a confusing array of EHR and health information system (HIS) vendors, each of which is vying for their attention and budget dollars. In the interest of perceived cost efficiency and ease of implementation, some hospitals may ultimately choose one core EHR/HIS vendor in the hopes that this “one-stop shop” will meet all of their clinical and non-clinical needs.

A second option is to choose a core vendor while also acknowledging that best-of-breed add-ons may be necessary in the future to enhance workflow. In this scenario, best-of-breed solutions are not initially incorporated into the facility’s strategic implementation plan. Rather, this technology is an afterthought, implemented only when the need for additional solutions becomes apparent.

A third, and increasingly more common, approach is to choose a core vendor while also planning in advance to strategically deploy best-of-breed technology. Hospitals pursuing

this strategic best-of-breed approach give priority to end-user concerns, understanding that one vendor can't be expected to provide the full spectrum of functionality required. Those charged with vendor selection assess each facility's operational needs up front, and then select the appropriate mix of best-of-breed solutions to complement a core vendor's product. This approach can help to ensure that a facility's total EHR solution accomplishes institutional objectives while meeting the specific needs of its key stakeholders.

## **Common perceptions**

One might wonder why more hospitals don't plan for a best-of-breed approach from the beginning, given its obvious benefits. Hospitals may not pursue this approach, in part, because many core vendors steer them away from it, maintaining that they alone can provide all of the essential functionality. As a result of this and other confusing messages in the market, a number of perceptions exist about core vendor solutions that don't always hold up under closer scrutiny. It's important for hospital decision-makers to be aware of these perceptions and to understand how best-of-breed solutions may fit into their EHR implementation approach.

### **Perception #1: Core vendors offer single-source solutions.**

Core vendors may represent themselves as delivering single-source solutions that can accommodate the needs of every function in the hospital. For the facility's IT professionals, the single-source concept can be very appealing, suggesting total interoperability and integration among the vendor's components. However, the concept often doesn't reflect the reality.

First, these solutions often are not derived from one single source. Rather, they may actually include a combination of individual products from multiple smaller vendors, perhaps resulting from previous acquisitions or partnerships. For example, core vendors routinely plug in other applications, such as an ED system, Charge Master, ADT or registration system, or encoder system. The result becomes essentially a multiple-source solution, possibly requiring interfaces in order to function.

A second problem stems from how a vendor defines "single source." The term can be confusing to hospitals because vendors may use it to mean a single source only for the main components of the EHR (e.g., the registration system, radiology, laboratory, clinical systems, ancillary systems, physician order entry, or pharmacy) – not truly for the entire EHR. When hospital decision-makers see this term used, it is essential that they clarify with the vendor the functions and components of the EHR that are specifically included.

### **Perception #2: One core vendor solution can effectively address all functions within the facility.**

The simplicity of the "one solution for all" concept is also appealing. And it's reasonable for hospital decision-makers to assume, based on the strength of a vendor's clinical applications, that the HIM functionality offered will be robust as well. In reality, these solutions may offer products with only basic functionality for essential HIM operations. Further, HIM users may discover that they are not able to customize the vendor's "vanilla" offering for

their own needs and that they are forced to adapt their workflow to accommodate the new software.

These product design limitations can impact every aspect of HIM. They're a major source of frustration for release of information (ROI) professionals, who typically develop their own workflow handoffs to accommodate their facility's unique requirements. In addition, ROI specialists commonly define sets of documents to be released based on the type of requester, such as one set of documents for an attorney request and a different set for a patient request. A best-of-breed software vendor who truly understands HIM will offer users these options and more. A core vendor's product may be "hard coded" to define only one set of documents for release.

Functional limitations are also found in deficiency management products, where, for example, an EHR vendor may not provide the ability to track and report on unsigned verbal orders. The assumption has been made – incorrectly – that in the EHR environment all orders will be electronic and signed automatically, so no tracking will be necessary. Because of similar assumptions, electronic signature products from core vendors may not enable physicians to easily print their signed documents. A best-of-breed HIM vendor understands HIM processes and needs, and knows that paper output may still be required in an electronic environment, if only during a transition period.

Facilities may find that the offering from their core vendor does not include any solution at all for key functions such as documentation queries. Queries are an inherent component of the coding process, and unanswered queries can significantly impact both documentation quality and reimbursement. Yet many hospitals are managing the query process manually. A best-of-breed solution can automate both concurrent and post-discharge query workflows and provide the robust reporting capabilities facilities need to effectively track and manage the query process.

Involving HIM professionals in the EHR decision-making process can help illuminate the differences between EHR products that truly meet HIM's functional needs and those that likely require best-of-breed add-ons.

### ***Perception #3: It's most cost-effective to choose one core vendor to provide all the applications for hospital functions.***

Choosing a core vendor and foregoing best-of-breed technology entirely can actually cost hospitals more money for a multitude of reasons.

Added staffing costs may result from a deficiency management system that does not enable the facility to monitor the complex rules governing the physician suspension process, including tracking notices sent to physicians, warnings, pre-warnings and suspension communication. As a result, HIM staff may be forced to perform this task manually to ensure that Joint Commission requirements and standards are met.

Facilities may encounter other unexpected or hidden costs. For example, best-of-breed vendors build flexibility, content expertise, and workflow analysis into their products. They typically provide a broad range of options for facilities to customize these products themselves to meet their own specific needs. In contrast, core vendors tend to offer a "one size fits all" approach that may not suit a hospital's needs. Many core vendors will offer customization,

but often at a very high price. Some may require hospitals to use the vendor’s own consultants for customization work or consultants who are certified in how to use the vendor’s particular products. This practice can present added costs for hospitals.

## ***A better-informed EHR decision process***

Given the importance of the HIM function, facilities should capitalize on the expertise of their HIM professionals to help choose the EHR solution that will both yield long-term success and also enhance revenue cycle and clinical documentation improvement efforts.

When evaluating any type of core or best-of-breed vendor, asking the right questions is critical. For example:

### **Does the vendor employ HIM content experts with operational experience?**

Determine whether the vendor employs experts who are well aware of the unique challenges the HIM department faces, as well as its workflow needs.

### **Does the vendor’s workflow engine also apply to HIM?**

Determine whether it applies to the entire suite of products or only to the clinical applications. Ask whether the vendor performs an on-site workflow assessment.

### **Does the vendor’s HIM offering allow customization to enable staff to work the way they prefer to work?**

Determine whether the products offer the flexibility to allow staff to easily customize them after the formal implementation process. If not, what is the typical fee for special customization?

### **Does the vendor interact frequently with HIM staff during the rollout process?**

Does the vendor propose ways it can customize its HIM products to accommodate the hospital’s unique needs? Determine whether the type of training offered is appropriate for the facility’s requirements. Is it structured as a single “train-the-trainer” session, or will the vendor train an entire group of employees? What type of post-implementation support does the vendor provide?

### **Does the vendor have a track record of delivering rapid software implementations?**

Best-of-breed applications can often be implemented in a matter of months, while core vendor solutions may require extensive time commitments.

### **Does the vendor communicate often with its hospital clients?**

Does the vendor host customer user group meetings where clients can meet face-to-face with vendor staff members and share best practices with other clients? Is there a client steering committee that provides direction for the vendor’s important technology-related decisions?

## ***The best decision could be best-of-breed***

For healthcare facilities, balancing institutional priorities has always presented a greater challenge than for other types of organizations. The implementation of an EHR – with its high price tag, myriad decisions, long lead time and impact on every function within the hospital – can make that challenge even greater. Choosing a strategic best-of-breed approach can enable hospitals to achieve their important institutional goals without having to sacrifice the operational effectiveness of HIM and other key stakeholders.

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### ***About Meta Health Technology***

Meta Health Technology is a full-service provider of health information management solutions for hospitals, clinics, physician group practices, and long-term care facilities across the United States and Canada. Meta's health information management software automates critical functions, including abstracting and coding, document imaging and management, physician query, clinical documentation improvement, chart analysis and completion, release of information, chart tracking, electronic signature, RAC management, electronic medical record, reporting and compliance, and department management. For more information, visit [www.metahealth.com](http://www.metahealth.com).