EHRs

How an implementation partner can be the key to success

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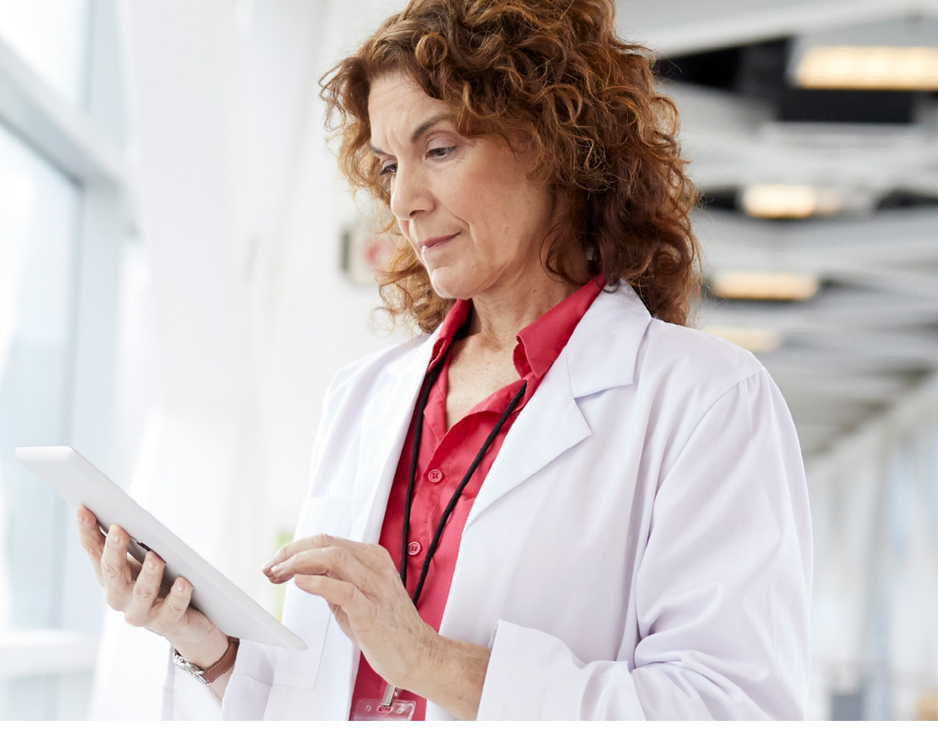
Are you looking to upgrade your EHR system?



We now live in a digital age, when technology is growing more and more essential to our daily lives. And that's never been more apparent than in healthcare.

A high-functioning electronic health record (EHR) system helps healthcare organizations manage information and documentation automatically so that they can treat the whole health of each patient.

At its best, the EHR enables patients to have an easier, more satisfactory experience with the healthcare system. Providers can better collaborate with other healthcare professionals — such as a primary care physician consulting with a cardiologist.

When a hospital and its related clinics and facilities are all on the same EHR system, patients don't have to spend time providing the hospital's imaging department with the same information they already gave the clinic earlier that day. What's more, patients have access to a patient portal where they can update their information, view their medical results and lab results and even make appointments.

The EHR is the most important tool healthcare organizations have to process the clinical and financial information necessary to care for patients and be paid for services. But the EHR is not just one of the most expensive investments an organization can make; reputation and financial performance can also hinge on the choice of the system and its implementation.

Will the EHR work in the ways you need it to? Will your staff actually use it? Do you even have the resources to launch a project of this scale?

Many healthcare organizations have found success by partnering with a firm specifically focused on ensuring that the implementation and adoption of a new EHR do not disrupt the vital functioning of the organization. This firm acts as the client advocate liaison, the project manager and the problem solver, helping to maintain the relationship between the healthcare organization and the EHR vendor throughout the implementation.

We're going to focus on this role and what it helps achieve, as well as what exactly a successful EHR implementation involves. You'll also hear from two healthcare organizations that took the plunge in upgrading their EHR and found success by working with Wipfli.

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But first, a little EHR history

What kind of EHR system are you looking to implement?

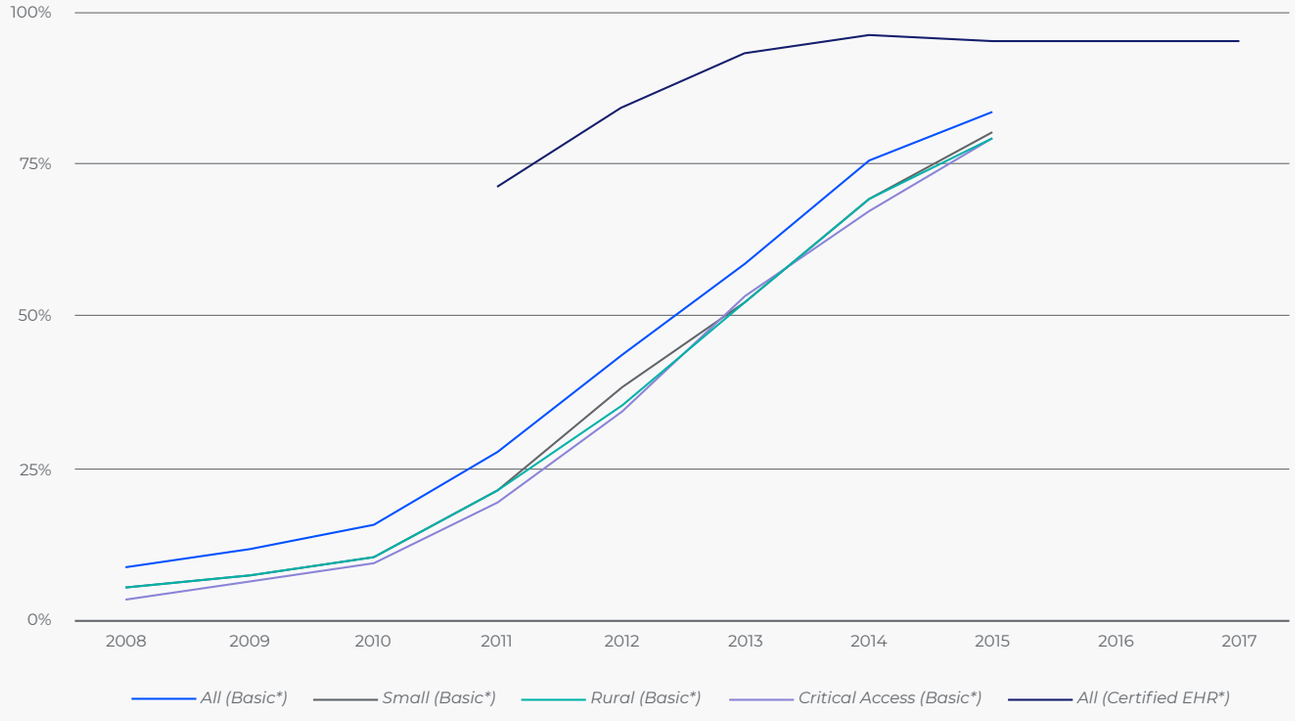
The healthcare industry is largely in a second phase when it comes to EHRs. In the 1990s and early 2000s, some organizations began to implement EHRs. Then, when the meaningful use incentives became available, other organizations that couldn't have otherwise afforded an EHR began to implement EHRs using the incentive monies. You can see in the chart to the right the much sharper incline of EHR adoption starting in 2010.

In this chart, a basic EHR system provides capabilities in the following areas: patient demographics, physician notes, nursing assessments, patient problem lists, electronic lists of medications taken by patients, discharge summaries, advanced directives, orders for medications, viewing of laboratory results, and viewing of radiology results.

A certified EHR system is one that meets the technological, functionality and security requirements of the Department of Health and Human Services.

After implementing their first EHR, many organizations found themselves dissatisfied with the system. One of two things occurred: 1) These systems were outdated, didn't fully meet their needs and weren't comprehensive enough or 2) the EHR vendor was acquired by another EHR vendor and the healthcare organization did not get on board with the new direction.

Non-federal acute care hospital EHR adoption



(Source: Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. "Non-federal Acute Care Hospital Electronic Health Record Adoption." dashboard.healthit.gov/quickstats/pages/FIG-Hospital-EHR-Adoption.php. September 2017.)

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So the unsatisfied organization decided to make the switch to a new system that brings new capabilities and better meets its needs all around. But because technology can be complicated, and change management is critical to ensuring adoption, many healthcare organizations turned to an implementation partner who brings expertise in both areas. They remembered from last time the strain on their resources an implementation project required, and so they sought out an implementation partner to take on that burden.

As it turns out, an implementation partner provides benefits to both the healthcare organization and the EHR vendor.

"There are a lot of moving parts in any implementation, and a large amount of time is always spent just learning each other's organizations," said Lindsay St. Germain, Director at Cerner. Cerner is one of the largest EHR providers, and Wipfli has a lot of experience implementing their product. "Partnering with an organization that understands Cerner's system and methodology helps reduce that learning curve."

From Lindsay's perspective, an implementation partner that understands Cerner can immediately provide value to the project, understand the tools utilized, anticipate what will be needed by Cerner and the client, and proactively manage expectations. The ability to explain the why behind certain decisions helps keep the client on track and moving toward a successful implementation.

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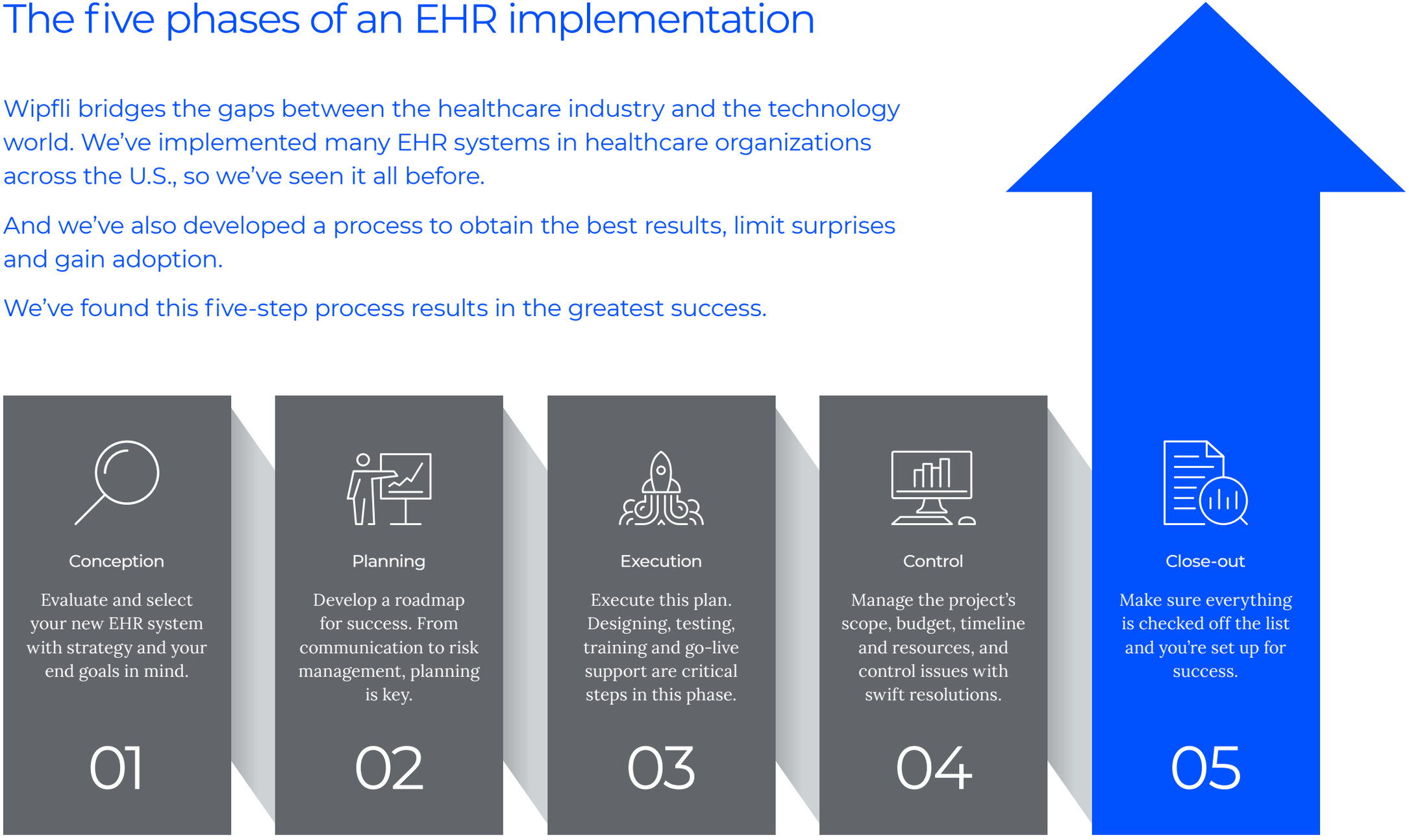
The five phases of an EHR implementation

Wipfli bridges the gaps between the healthcare industry and the technology world. We've implemented many EHR systems in healthcare organizations across the U.S., so we've seen it all before.

And we've also developed a process to obtain the best results, limit surprises and gain adoption.

We've found this five-step process results in the greatest success.



Conception

Evaluate and select your new EHR system with strategy and your end goals in mind.

01

Planning

Develop a roadmap for success. From communication to risk management, planning is key.

02

Execution

Execute this plan. Designing, testing, training and go-live support are critical steps in this phase.

03

Control

Manage the project's scope, budget, timeline and resources, and control issues with swift resolutions.

04

Close-out

Make sure everything is checked off the list and you're set up for success.

05

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Step #1: Conception

The conception phase is the EHR selection process. During the selection process, a healthcare organization identifies the metrics, characteristics and values of its new EHR partner and their system that most align with the healthcare organization's needs.

Step #2: Planning

Advanced planning is crucial to a successful implementation. That's why we lead clients through developing certain documents that will form the cornerstones of the project. Our templates (put together through our years of experience and best practices) streamline this process. And our group discussions with your team customize them to your needs.

So what does this include?

First, we develop with you a very thorough project charter that covers the project vision, scope, objectives, critical success factors, assumptions and constraints.

And then there's the communication plan. It's true that you can't over-communicate during large projects that depend on adoption. We work with you to establish a communication plan that identifies the who, what, when and how of information that will be shared with all stakeholders — including staff, patients and the general public. These are the keys to consistent, clear and effective communication.

And that leads into developing a risk plan. This plan identifies potential risks, the impact of a risk occurring and what the planned action steps are to mitigate that risk. It's critical to develop a risk plan at the start of the project so that you can objectively (and proactively) look at risks and solutions up front, rather than having to react to them as they occur and deal with the stress and emotional fallout.

Step #3: Execution

Execution forms the largest phase of the project. This is when your team will work closest with the EHR vendor you've chosen. Your team will be involved in design decisions, testing, training and educating your end users.

As your implementation partner, Wipfli helps you apply critical thinking techniques and shares industry best practices so that your team can make key design decisions. Your new EHR will be an integrated system that seamlessly shares information with individuals who need it. In that spirit, we assist with creating a culture of a holistic team that works together and avoids departmental, siloed decisions.

Step #4: Control

Controlling a project means managing its scope, budget, timeline and resources, which helps ensure success (as well as a smoother implementation). But it also includes controlling any issues that come up. Some of those issues are predictable, while others pop up throughout the project.

A skilled project manager has the experience to not only put issues into perspective but also drive the crucial conversations that enable a swift and effective resolution. You should be able to rely on them to control these difficult aspects of a project so your team can focus on your core priorities.

Step #5: Close-out

The final phase of an EHR implementation ensures everything is checked off the list (because, of course, you want all contractual commitments to have been met). Wipfli walks clients through a process of reviewing commitments and ensuring all these commitments have been met prior to the vendor's implementation team being released.

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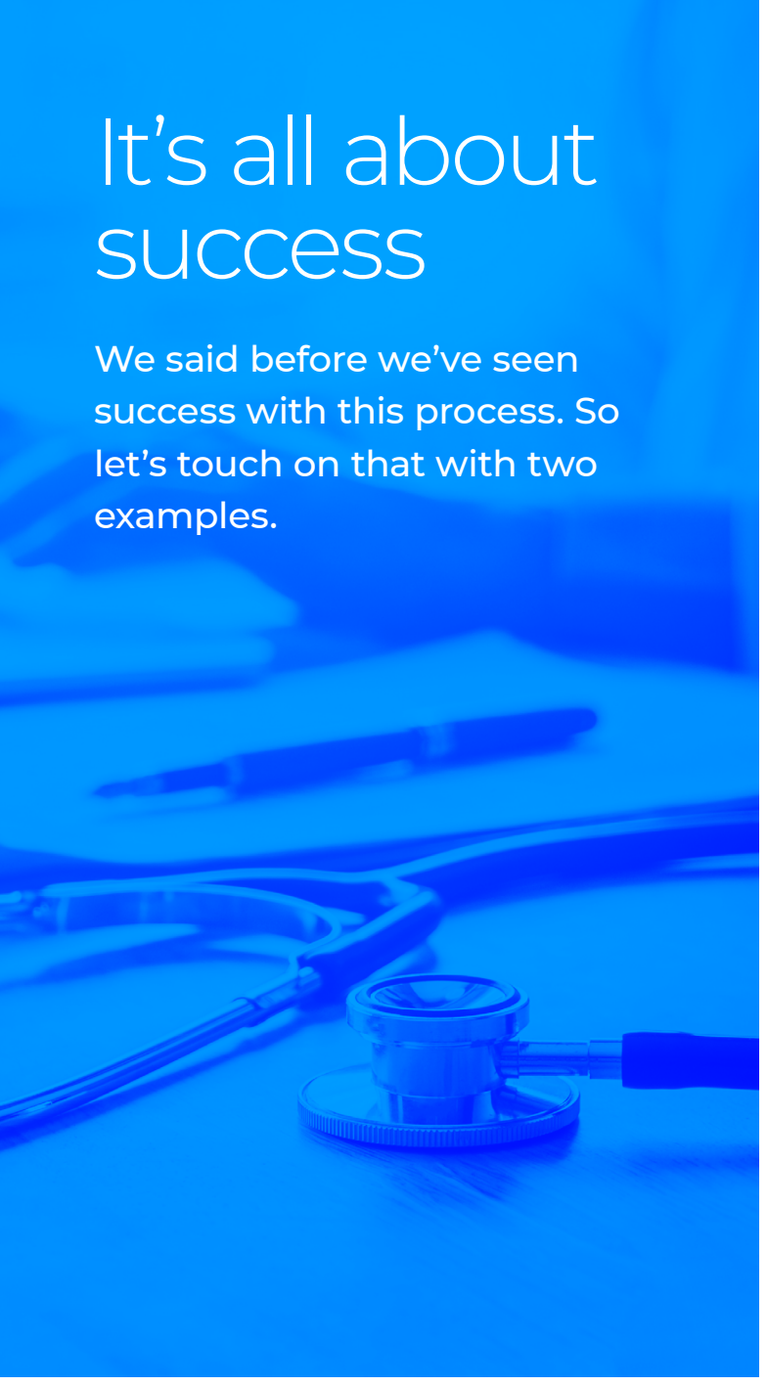
It's all about success

We said before we've seen success with this process. So let's touch on that with two examples.



Midwest Medical Center

Midwest Medical Center is a critical access hospital located in Galena, Illinois.

The hospital came to Wipfli because its EHR system could no longer meet its needs or satisfy meaningful use requirements. But that wasn't it. Through experiencing other challenges, the hospital realized it needed to replace not only its EHR but also its financial management and accounting program, time and attendance system, payroll, and picture archive and communication system (PACS).

Wipfli went through the five-step process with Midwest Medical, which meant first providing a roadmap for the implementation journey. We documented current-state and future-state workflows at all department levels, including clinical, business office and all ancillaries.

We also served as Midwest Medical's technical advisor, facilitating weekly meetings with vendors and hospital staff to ensure contract follow-through, avert or resolve issues and keep the implementation on track and controlled.

One big key to success was Midwest Medical's President and CEO, Tracy Bauer, taking on the project sponsor role (as opposed to the hospital's CFO or CMO, which is more typical). She was engaged and involved throughout the implementation, bringing a high level of knowledge and the ability to see potential problems within her organization and resolve them immediately.

And with Wipfli on board as project manager, in less than a year, Midwest Medical was able to completely replace its EHR system and the associated ancillary systems. This positioned them to increase patient engagement and provide greater access to patient information for both hospital staff and the patients themselves. The new system even improved the hospital's quality of care, documentation and staff workflow processes, allowing them to further ensure patient safety and satisfaction. And lastly, it created efficiencies and reduced healthcare delivery costs.

> "We were very fortunate to have Wipfli's help with the implementation of our electronic health record. They were able to provide the expertise we needed to be successful," said Tracy. "A critical access hospital (like ours) doesn't have the ability to hire various IT and management positions, and our current employees already wear multiple hats, so to bring in the expertise Wipfli had to offer was very effective."

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Hawaii Health System

On the Hawaiian island of Kauai, there are three hospitals, and the Hawaii Health System runs two of them: the Samuel Mahelona Memorial Hospital and Kauai Veterans Memorial Hospital. Both are critical access hospitals.

Both hospitals have skilled nursing facilities, and there are also five clinics and a behavioral health unit. All needed to adopt the EHR system alongside the two hospitals.

This meant the EHR implementation was especially complex. Developing, designing and testing the billing system alone would be much more complex than in a single-facility environment. Being able to meet Hawaii Health System's clinical and operational needs with one EHR system made an implementation partner critical to success.

"As soon as we signed the contract to purchase our EHR, I knew that we would need a partner that was both knowledgeable about critical access hospitals and implementing EHRs," said Christine Asato, Regional Chief Financial Officer. "All EHRs are not created equal. We wanted a partner that knew the ins and outs of the Cerner system and had actual implementation experience under their belt. This would help keep us on track and avoid pitfalls like trying to reinvent the wheel."

Hawaii Health System went live on the Cerner EHR on July 1, 2019. Their leadership ended up most impressed with how Wipfli managed relationships between the various parties. Because Wipfli is skilled and experienced at having crucial conversations and managing accountability, we helped overcome hurdles that would have otherwise proved to be major obstacles.

And that includes strategizing when things don't always go as planned.

"Six weeks prior to go-live, we had just completed our second round of integration testing and identified a significant concern," said Christine. "My outlook on our go-live was not looking good, so I called our Wipfli project manager. For the next hour, we discussed, brainstormed and developed our strategy to share my concerns with Cerner. Our project manager calmly talked me off the ledge, which was invaluable to me as the project sponsor and helped preserve our relationship with Cerner. He went above and beyond in all areas and was personally invested in our people, project and processes."

Cerner's Lindsay St. Germain also reinforced the importance of having a dedicated project manager: Because undertaking a new EHR implementation requires a lot of attention and focus from every area of the facility, a dedicated project manager helps ensure things don't slip through the cracks with design, testing and ultimately conversion.

"A dedicated project manager is invaluable," Lindsay said. "Their focus helps wrangle all the details so that end users don't have to spend time on the logistics required for success. When everyone can focus on their strengths and work in unison, it helps with a smoother transition."

With Wipfli on its side, Hawaii Health System was able to meet its go-live date. And now that it's out of the go-live phase, it's ready to begin reaping the benefits of an EHR system that ties its hospitals, SNFs, clinics and behavioral health unit together and provides a better experience for staff and patients alike.

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We've covered the implementation phases. We've talked about the role of an implementation partner. And we've highlighted the importance of technology in today's digital world. But the real focus is on you and your organization.

What's your main objective for installing a new EHR system? It's a simple question, but it's one that will guide us to help you implement your new EHR that meets your organization's needs and those of your patients.

If you'd like to learn more about Wipfli's EHR implementation process or get started, contact us or visit our EHR page.

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