Telehealth Vendor Selection: Get Intentional, Not Overwhelmed

Monica Leslie

The term "vendor overwhelmed" in the telehealth market is alive and well. In a global market predicted to more than double in value over the next several years to an estimated $36.2B,[1] the number of vendors that have flooded the market is not surprising. As a "vendor agnostic" telehealth consulting team, Schumacher Clinical Partners, Subsidium Healthcare, specializes in helping clients plan, design, select, and implement telehealth programs. What follows is information regarding solutions and key differentiators for successful vendor selection.

Beyond the Pitch

An effective approach to vendor selection goes beyond the pitch and digs deep into the details to understand true fitness for an organization's unique program needs. The key to finding the vendor solution that is best for a telehealth program is to approach the process from dual angles with clarity.

1. Understand the details of your organization's telehealth strategic plan.
2. Utilize a uniform approach tailored to your organization's needs when assessing each vendor solution.

Understand the Details of the Organization's Telehealth Strategic Plan

Before meetings and demos, clearly define the details of the organization's telehealth strategy. Unless you were part of the planning process, ask to see the plan or meet with team members involved in crafting it. Table 1 lists essential information towards this end.

Item	Request
Telehealth Business Model	Organizational history with telehealth
Service Lines	Program objectives Target population
Technology/infrastructure	Existing and planned service lines

Telehealth Business Model

Know the model your organization is planning to use for telehealth services in order to assess vendor fit with operational and financial program goals. Operational model examples include: acute visits, direct to consumer video visits, remote monitoring, provider-to-provider, store-and-forward, medication adherence, and patient engagement.

Examples of financial models include: fee for service, shared risk, value and quality-based, etc. Additionally, understand whether your organization plans to staff the program using existing internal resources or by contracting with external resources. Some vendors offer full service solutions, while others only offer technology.

Service Lines

Whether the organization is single service-focused or a health system, consider the service lines to be offered as related to telehealth.

Some vendors may unable to offer clinical applications or technologies that satisfy your needs, while others will offer expertise in specific services. If the organization seeks to add telehealth services in telepsychiatry, urgent care, home care/geriatrics, teleICU, use the initial and future expected service offerings to narrow your search, while keeping in mind the need for future growth scale of the program.

Existing Program Technology

Understand the technology/infrastructure within the organization. There may be ongoing (or past) activities in telehealth. Seamless integration of new technology into existing technology is essential. Also, understand the extent to which existing infrastructure can be leveraged. This can have major implications on total cost of ownership.

A Tailored, Uniform Approach to Assessing Telehealth Vendors

A clearly defined telehealth strategy outlined above facilitates assessment of prospective vendors. Key considerations for vendor selection are discussed here. Most important, be ready to talk details, and never get overwhelmed by jargon. Finally, all "solutions" must be HIPAA-compliant.

Get as specific

Create a comprehensive list of questions that cover topics such as implementation support, patient engagement tools, system integration, and initial and ongoing technical support.

Then create a profile for each vendor, highlighting key comparables such as technology offerings, service models, and pricing.

Beware of Jargon

Don't allow yourself to get bogged down in flowery language or jargon commonly used to describe services and solutions. Rather, focus on previously define strategic needs of the organization by asking targeted questions around those needs. Request clarification if answers are obtuse.

HIPAA

All solutions should be Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) compliant and integrate with your existing medical informatics systems. From there, other important options include cloud-based, electronic health record (HER) interface capability, mobile apps, e-prescribing, and peripheral capable.

Make an Informed Decision

Have a scoring methodology and process to compare vendors based on responses and solutions provided to your questions. It is also helpful to use a weighting system for scoring so that the key criteria dependent on organizational strategy are prioritized.

Finally, ask for and contact the vendor's references. This includes site visits. Physically placing hands on the technology and seeing it in action will help determine if the solution is right for your organization's existing systems and processes.

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Reference

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program objections, strategic plan, telehealth and telemedicine, telemedicine process improvement, telemedicine program implementation, vendor selection