Digital Basics for Computer Novices

In corporate America, there's a PC in every cubicle and an iPhone on every hip, but healthcare is one of the few business environments left in which paper still reigns. This is perhaps ironic, since healthcare is also one of the most high-tech businesses in America. Regardless of their age, healthcare personnel have often skated around computer use by working in clinical settings. It may take another generation, says John Hsu, an anesthesiologist who has written about the problem, before computer-phobic healthcare personnel are replaced by more tech-savvy workers. And therein lies a key factor—the human factor—in resistance to electronic health records (EHR) adoption, says Hsu.

Invariably, some staff members will plead computer illiteracy and expect to be let off the hook when an EHR is introduced to the practice. A physician may want to retain his own paper files, or a longtime staff member might somehow expect to float outside the system—take vitals, say, and let someone else enter them into the EHR. But allowing parallel paper and electronic systems to exist beyond the transitional period is like having one person in a design studio creating illustrations on mat boards while the other six graphic artists work in Illustrator.

Compromise may be a good thing, but it's not what's needed when a clinician or staffer tries to opt out of converting to the EHR. Strong leadership and a heavy dose of enthusiasm will generally carry the day. Owen O'Neill, a champion of his practice's EHR, was both delighted and astonished to watch physicians in his group with only rudimentary computer skills become versatile EHR users. These computer converts tend to take advantage of more of the EHR's features, O'Neill notes, perhaps because they participated in additional training. With that in mind, be sure everyone on your staff is familiar with the computing terms and concepts outlined in the table below. After all, you don't want to end up a PEBCAK—that's geek speak for "Problem Exists Between Chair And Keyboard."