

# Ages of Civilization: Lessons for Transforming Healthcare

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To understand the significant changes the HIM profession is experiencing today, it may help to look at a little history, namely the five ages of civilization and how we have transitioned from one to the next. In his book *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, Stephen Covey lists the five ages of civilization as:

- The hunter and gatherer age
- The agricultural age
- The industrial age
- The information or knowledge worker age
- The age of wisdom<sup>1</sup>

Each transition to a new age required a period to learn and adapt to a new way of doing things, similar to what the HIM profession is facing in the transformation to e-HIM®. Each new age was also probably greeted with cynicism, fear of the unknown, and rebellious or uncooperative behavior from those rooted in the previous age—not dissimilar to some responses to the coming electronic healthcare age.

## Learning from History

What can we learn from history and the five ages of civilization? We learn that to be successful in transforming from one age of civilization to the next we must provide evidence of the tangible benefits derived by learning new skills and implementing new technology. Secondly, we learn that we need new knowledge, new skill sets, and new tools. But more importantly, we need a new mindset and a new way of thinking—a new paradigm.

I liken our attempt to transform healthcare today to the transformations that have led us from one age to the next. We must acquire new knowledge, new skills, and new technologies to accomplish the goals we have set for our industry. But fundamentally, we are first and foremost adopting a new paradigm of expectations and responsibilities, which includes a new set of stakeholders who are more savvy and more diverse than ever before.

Including consumers in the framework of our healthcare delivery system and affording them choice—shifting responsibilities from what typically was within the provider domain to others—requires different solutions than presented in the past. And when presented with a new challenge, old, once-successful responses most likely will no longer be adequate.

The old paradigm still dominates today's healthcare system, preventing us from bringing new solutions and approaches to support this transformation. As management expert Peter Drucker put it in 2000, "In a few hundred years when the history of our time is written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event those historians will see is not technology, not the Internet, not the e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time—literally—substantial and rapidly growing number of people have choices. For the first time they will have to manage themselves. And society is totally unprepared for it."<sup>2</sup> I think we could say the same about healthcare.

## Notes

1. Covey, Stephen R. *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. New York: Free Press, 2004.
2. Drucker, Peter. "Managing Knowledge Means Managing Oneself." *Leader to Leader*, Spring (2000). Available online at [www.pfd.org/leaderbooks/L2L/spring2000/drucker.html](http://www.pfd.org/leaderbooks/L2L/spring2000/drucker.html).

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