

Career Management, Not Transition

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by John P. Barrett

Managing your career means more than just changing jobs. It's a process that you can plan and control. Find out the steps to shaping your professional future in this article.

Considering all the ways the workplace has changed in recent years, there's one change that affects almost everyone.

In today's workplace, we are all responsible for controlling and managing our careers. Our employers no longer have the sole responsibility to identify career paths and offer promotional or growth opportunities. Whether we are employees, consultants, or self-employed, the responsibility has become ours.

But how do we manage our own careers? Employers have not been quick to identify structure, assistance, or resources for individuals to use in assessing, evaluating, and giving direction to their careers. There are, however, some effective tools and strategies.

This article will provide a simple structure to help you proactively manage your own career. The structure has three principal components: assessment and strategy formulation, examining the marketplace (current workplace and external market), and preparing a career development plan.

Looking Inward

The responsibility of managing our own careers should be especially apparent to HIM professionals. Historically, in healthcare, services to patients, and hence careers, were built around specialties and sub-specialties in medicine, nursing, ancillary services, and support services. As a result, careers were limited to growth within a profession or classification. If we have learned one thing from the reengineering era to take forward, it is the value of multit talented individuals with skill sets that can be applied in many and various settings.

This is particularly true for the health information field, as HIM professionals' roles evolve. This is evidence of a skill set taking on new dimensions, surviving a reengineering process, and lending itself to proactive career management—instead of a mere transition to a different occupation or organization.

To begin the career management process, however, we need to gather information. Baseline information is essential for research and planning purposes, whether applied to a research project or a personal development plan.

As you collect your information, **begin with basic historical facts** about your career—positions held, responsibilities, education and training completed, and certifications.

More important, however, is to **gather what you have accomplished**—projects, events, and challenges where you were able to contribute to the success of the unit, department, or overall organization.

Identify at least five or six accomplishments and write them down. **Describe each accomplishment** to include the challenge, the action taken, and the results or outcome. This organizes the information for future reference, encapsulates it for your resume or marketing profile, prepares you for any interview questions, and even makes substantive agenda items for you to present in an interview.

You can peel back the onion skin even further, however. **What skills did you use and develop** while contributing to the accomplishments? Technical skills? Interpersonal skills? Planning and organizing skills? Analytical? Measurement? Facilitating

or training others (such as physicians, registered nurses, other clinicians)?

Another layer to peel back—**what were your likes and dislikes** related to responsibilities and accomplishments? These tell a story and point out a direction. Write them down. Often things we like to do relate to a strong skill set; things we dislike relate to an undeveloped or underdeveloped skill set and may not really be a dislike.

Answer these questions: What are your work values? Do you prefer working alone or with others as part of a team? What is your work ethic? What responsibilities do you value most related to career growth and development? What about stability? Adventure? Working with patients, the healthcare professions, or the public? How do you approach change, pressure, and making decisions?

What are your interests? Where do you wish to take your career? Within your profession/occupation? Expanding it beyond your unit or department? Expanding it to a broader-based generalist role? To another organization perhaps?

What are the interests you have not shared with anyone? Becoming a lecturer? Facilitator? Author? What hobbies or outside, personal activities contribute to building or adding value to your skill set? Any related or unrelated occupations come to mind? For example, if you have artistic talent, you may want to work as a medical illustrator for a publisher, a researcher, or in a medical school setting.

Having examined the above categories, **identify your functional or transferable skills**. What skills appeared most often? What skills were highlighted in past performance evaluations? What is the "common denominator" (as we learned in grade-school fractions)? What is the DNA, as scientists are asking today? Knowing these strengths and abilities lays a foundation for your career strategy.

From Findings to Strategy

To add focus to your career, you should develop a career strategy. This strategy becomes your road map. It also becomes a marketing tool, because it can be shared with others to enhance focus or identify target situations or settings.

The strategy flows from the self-assessment exercise and defines what you want out of life. It is also a plan to *make it happen* versus *letting it happen*. It evolves naturally from strengths, abilities, likes, interests, and desires. It requires total honesty with yourself. Important questions to answer can be found in "[Starting Your Strategy](#)," below.

Looking Outward

After completing the introspection of looking inward through a personal self-assessment, it's time to change lenses and look outside yourself to what is occurring or what is anticipated in your work unit, department, organization, and industry. What's happening in your profession or occupation?

As you explore and consider options, **keep both short- and long-range** possibilities in mind. Identify milestones where appropriate to secure the proper experiences or skill levels. You also should probe and examine what is anticipated—what will the next two, three, five years bring in terms of change, advancement, and challenge?

An important first step in this phase is to **examine your career strategy in relation to the organization where you work**. What are the core competencies and values of the organization, and how do they match up with the career strategy you've developed? What are the trends in the business, industry, or profession (e.g., more technology applications, facilitating record coding, record management workshops for clinicians, etc.)?

Horizontal growth within your position or occupation is a first possibility. Taking on other tasks or responsibilities related to what you are already doing is a good start. What process or procedure can you improve, change, create, or eliminate to make your unit more successful?

What expansion opportunities exist? Are there vertical promotion opportunities within the department? Are they technical in nature or do they require management skills? Will a lateral move help to broaden experience? What competencies, skill

levels, and other requirements are necessary for other advancement opportunities in your organization? What preparation is necessary? What is a reasonable time frame to prepare for such a move?

Gathering information will be a helpful part of your homework. You will be conveying interest, verifying a path to advance, and developing relationships as you progress. What professional associations or task force assignments will help you gain better understanding of expectations? **Look for a potential mentor** who can share experiences, strategy, and tactics about how to accomplish next steps and advance to your targeted goal.

How do your values match with the values of your organization? If your answer is positive, look for career moves and a mentor within your organization. If the values do not match, it may mean building experiences over a time frame to ultimately leave the organization for a culture and environment more conducive to your career strategy.

What's on the HIM Horizon?

What are some of the opportunities for HIM professionals—present and anticipated?

The application of information technology to the healthcare industry opens several career advancement opportunities. Think about occupations and professions within the information systems area, such as:

- programmer
- systems analyst
- database administrator
- facilitator to train physicians, nurses, and clinicians in the use of patient information systems and automated medical charting at the patient's bedside or in the clinic examination room

Likewise, what are the applications in physicians' offices and medical group practices where medical records, financial records, and other business record-keeping is essential?

What opportunities exist with managed care companies, insurance providers, third-party benefit administrators, and pharmaceutical companies who rely heavily on medical records, in-depth knowledge of medical terminology, and information systems technology?

The new outpatient prospective payment system, mandated by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 and codified in final regulations earlier this year, changes how Medicare will pay hospitals for ambulatory care and outpatient procedures. To prepare for the new system, hospitals will have to overhaul or add to current systems to ensure proper coding, billing, and medical record entries to databases. This may mean new opportunities for HIM professionals to work with physicians, nursing staff, and therapists to establish, coordinate, implement, and manage this process on an ongoing basis.

Electronic patient records are another area of new opportunities. For example, the new electronic record system at the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center, dubbed the Gemini Project, serves extensive outpatient facilities and several primary care clinics within a 20-mile radius. *Modern Healthcare* reports the clinical engine is used daily by 1,500 physicians, residents, nurses, and other clinicians. More than 400,000 electronic charts were opened in one month with a daily average of 6,200 sign-ins.¹ The backbone for this type of system comes from input by HIM professionals who are involved in its design, delivery, implementation, and ongoing maintenance.

A review of Internet-based job banks reveals career opportunities within information systems and patient care information systems that are logical opportunities. All levels require information systems experience with clinical and business systems. Common experience requirements include planning, evaluation, and development of information systems and communications.

Other required skills include the ability to assess needs for a patient information system; develop strategic planning and establish overall standards, policies and procedures; ensure system backups and disaster recovery plans are in place; and develop an information security policy. In the future, other opportunities will likely emerge. For example, think of the evolution from a role in a tumor or cancer registry to a position as a research associate in the unfolding world of genome research. HIM professionals will document pathways, catalog and retrieve information, and link it to treatment protocols.

Your challenge is to think of other future roles to which you could transfer your skill sets and experience.

Looking Forward

The time has come to develop a career plan for yourself. To build a short-form development plan to prepare written responses to the questions listed in "[Mapping Your Course](#)," below.

Communicate your goals to those who can help you reach them—your manager, your mentor, your significant other. Ask for their feedback. Create alternatives—Plan A and Plan B. The need to be flexible will be essential as technology changes, and as the healthcare industry continues to evolve.

You can develop goals in the area of personal development, role enhancement, promotion, a lateral move to gain valuable experience, changing fields or functions, reduced or changed responsibilities, and exploratory.

During this process, remember that career action plans are supported by goals that are SMART:

- Specific (define it)
- Measurable (quantify it, observable accomplishment)
- Achievable (skills, ability, time to make it happen)
- Results-oriented (outcome to be achieved)
- Time frame (by when to be accomplished)

Goals are supported by **strategies** that contribute to achieving the goal (e.g., granting horizontal experience to prepare for a later move).

When will you **start** to work on the strategy? What is the time frame for **completion** of the goal? How will the goal be **measured**?

In addition to the new opportunities discussed above, there are still more possibilities. For example, think of yourself:

- doing work comparable to a paralegal assisting in litigation support, but in this case assisting a physician, clinician, or scientist preparing and codifying research data for individual patient care plans
- working as a medical librarian cataloging and retrieving information related to medical and clinical research for patients, physicians, clinicians, or health administrators
- teaching students research techniques and procedures at a medical school or nursing school
- managing your own business

Most importantly, imagine yourself managing your own career. What are you waiting for?

Note

1. Morrissey, John. "Gemini Rising." *Modern Healthcare* 30, no. 26 (2000): 46-49.

Starting Your Strategy

Career strategy considerations include responding to the following probes. A written response to the questions below will help you crystallize your thinking and build accountability to yourself to take active control in managing your career. Everyday clues will help you respond to these inquiries. Developing a career strategy will give you direction in both your personal and professional lives. You may also consider completing the exercise with your significant other as a lifework plan.

- What are your primary interests?
- What are your distinctive competencies?
- What special skills have you developed?
- What strengths are you known for?
- What are the underlying attributes to the responses in the above questions?
- What do you enjoy most while working and away from work that can be applied to a career?

- What functional area do you align with best?
- What industry or industries appeal to you or use the skill set and experiences you possess or will develop?
- Where do you wish to live? Are you open to relocation?
- What type of organizational culture do you prefer?
- What type of work environment do you prefer?
- What is your income objective?
- Is the career of your significant other similar, dissimilar, or portable at the time of relocation?
- Are there family issues to be considered in any career commitments or moves?
- What are your retirement goals?
- What is your short-term career strategy? What is your long-term career strategy?

Mapping Your Course

Once you've determined your goals and considered possible options and alternatives, you can take the next step—building your career development plan. To do so, you will need to answer questions like these:

- What areas/skills do you wish to develop?
- What is your motivation to improve your skills in this area?
- Define a specific skill or area for development?
- What objective do you wish to accomplish in relation to developing this skill?
- What barriers or obstacles exist to accomplishing this objective?
- What solutions can you, colleagues, or your mentor think of to overcome barriers?
- What is your action plan and time frame for reaching your objective?
- What resources will you use in order to reach your objective?
- How will you know when you have reached your objective?
- What will your reward be to yourself for reaching the objective?

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