

# Commitment to Change Creates New Opportunities

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*by Anne Zender, managing editor*

If you want to be an agent of change, sometimes you must first change your own life. That's a lesson Debra Harris, MA, RRA, has learned.

Harris, director of health information services at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, WA, began the process when she decided that continuing her education would broaden her career horizons. Having spent most of her career in smaller hospitals, she wanted a position in a larger facility—and she wanted to devote more of her time to leadership and policy making instead of overseeing operations. "I wanted to be able to look at things at an enterprise level," she says, "and affect change at the strategic level." To make this switch, she needed some new skills. So she embarked on a seven-year process that ended when she received her master's degree from the College of St. Scholastica in 1997.

Harris chose to work toward a master of arts with concentration in management, a decision guided by her work experience. "I had spent my career managing, and I felt it was my specialty," she says. The school's program allowed her significant flexibility—students were only required to be on campus two weeks per year, and most class work was done by correspondence. She could continue to work full time and make progress on her education.

"I needed flexibility in my school commitments to accommodate my work commitments," Harris says. The results benefited both pursuits, she found, as what she was learning in school could frequently be applied to work—even when she was completing her thesis at the end of the program.

## Drawing from Life

Returning to school as an experienced HIM professional was a positive experience, Harris says, in large part because her program was designed especially for nontraditional students. "It relied heavily on work and life experience," she says. In addition, "they were very good at working with nontraditional students. They understood that life happens while you go to school."

What's more, the process allowed Harris to bring new strengths to her job. "I developed a set of behaviors that helped me discipline myself to get a task done," she says. "I now have a set of discipline skills that helps me break something big into manageable pieces—anything that takes seven years to complete will have that effect," she adds, laughing. She also benefits from sharpened writing and leadership skills.

In addition to these rewards, Harris eventually landed her dream job shortly after receiving her degree. While she can't directly tie getting the job at Swedish Medical Center, one of the largest medical centers in the Northwest, to finishing her degree, she says that she "wouldn't have had the footing in the interview process had I not had the master's degree. Despite my experience and performance, the degree was an important competitive advantage," she says.

## 'Make a Commitment'

While Harris is not sure that she will be returning to school again for formal education, she knows that she will continue to be a lifelong learner. "There are so many new things facing HIM professionals—we're all going to be in learning mode," she says. From her point of view, that's a plus. "Education is one of the things I personally value," she says. "Going back to school was kind of second nature to me."

That's not to say that the process didn't seem scary initially. Harris remembers that, at first, she thought she wouldn't be able to complete the program. But, she adds, "I estimated how old I would be by the time I finished my degree," she says. "I realized that I would be that age whether I continued my education or not."

She advises fellow HIM professionals who decide to go back to school that it's a change worth making—if they make a commitment to their education and to themselves. "It's not always easy," she says. "If you really want to continue your education or make a career change, you have to remember that you really want it. But it's never too late to begin."

## Resources

Harris recommends some of her favorite titles on dealing with change:

Cildress, John, Larry E. Senn, John R. Childress, and Richard Measelle. *In the Eye of the Storm*. Provo, UT: Executive Excellence, 1997.

Carlson, Richard. *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and It's All Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things from Taking Over Your Life*. Los Angeles, CA: Hyperion, 1997.

Nanus, Burt, and Warren Bennis. *Visionary Leadership: Creating a Compelling Sense of Direction for Your Organization*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

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