

Cultivate a Desire to Learn

Save to myBoK

by Claire Dixon-Lee, PhD, RRA

As I travel the country meeting many of you, I am very curious about the diversity of jobs, skills, and settings in which you work. The creativity, independence, and resourcefulness that come with career redefinition fascinate me. All of us working under the umbrella of health information management can be classified as "knowledge workers"—the modern term used to broadly describe work that is based on a structured core education, utilizes various technological tools, and has direct involvement with information creation, management, analysis, and communication.

Peter Drucker writes, "Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves—their strengths, their values, and how they best perform."¹ We hear a great deal about analyzing strengths and weaknesses, both individually and organizationwide, which is certainly a key factor in knowing ourselves. We are also advised to concentrate on our strengths, though weaknesses are sometimes correctable; we can modify or overcome some of them. However, a trusted colleague once suggested that she prefers not to waste time trying to improve a weakness, but rather to capitalize on a strength. I believe that is sound advice.

The Path to Discovery

To discover your strengths, you need feedback analysis. The first step is to concentrate on thorough self-assessment and personal reflection. Not only should we identify and work on our strengths, we need to know where to improve skills or acquire new ones. A wonderful place to start is the AHIMA 1999 Professional Development Inventory, sent to all active members. Created by the Committee on Professional Development, it provides analytical scenarios with an extensive assortment of reference sources.

Setting a course for your career-related educational experiences—both formal and continuing—should be a regular habit for each of us. Educational budgets are tight, so many of us need to commit personal funds wisely, choosing educational experiences that will most directly add value in strengthening our current job or preparing for the future.

It is important to periodically rethink what will be personally satisfying and challenging in your work life. How can you leverage what you know now (and what you know best) with what the healthcare marketplace will need in the future? Where do you want to emphasize your skills? What more do you need to know to be better at your job?

Try Something New

Whether thinking about a mid-life or mid-career job change, or even an entry-level position, questions arise as to what type of work, environment, or culture will be most challenging and sustaining for you. In the past, retirement truly concluded one's work life. Current literature implies that as knowledge workers, we may not be "finished" working after 40-plus years on the job, just merely bored. We will be ready for new challenges, or seek fun in an expanding hobby, but will never quite leave the thirst for knowledge that we have cultivated during our working years. Life is a series of refresher courses. In the words of Merlin the Magician to a young King Arthur: "The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails; the only thing which the mind can never exhaust and never dream of regretting."²

Experts abound in every field. We are experts in our particular health information discipline. But we can all ask questions and learn more. Drucker suggests that we discover where our intellectual arrogance might be causing disabling ignorance and overcome it.³ Often, people with great expertise in one area are contemptuous of knowledge in other areas. Learn to cultivate openness. Learning something new keeps you in a beginner's frame of mind. Maintaining openness to learning will give you a richer, more productive, and satisfying life.

We all need to perfect our on-the-job performance. There is always room to improve your problem-solving abilities, team skills, interpersonal relationships, communication techniques, or ability to juggle multiple priorities, meet deadlines, or fight against procrastination. Knowing how you learn best is another important step. Not only can this help you select the most appropriate sources of new information, it will help you perform better and make effective use of new knowledge. People learn in diverse ways. Research has characterized learning in a variety of modes, including those who learn by listening, reading, writing, observing, or talking.

For example, in my early years as an educator, I diligently prepared for a new class by reading the material and writing out detailed notes. I soon realized that once I delivered the class lecture, rephrasing difficult concepts or illustrating with examples and analogies for the students, talking was my best learning style. I needed to internalize the material through discussion and repetition. Later, as I pursued graduate studies, I found that study groups were my best learning tool. Even today, when I attend a seminar, I like to talk over what I have heard with other attendees. Using e-mail and other forms of discussion also provide the reinforcement I need.

For the future, we can expect both formal academic and continuing education to be increasingly tied to technology. This will lead many of us to experiment with distance learning offerings. Using video, Web-based technology, and other virtual approaches to educational delivery creates burgeoning opportunities for online education. This gives us access to the experts and enables us to specialize our education, regardless of location and without the travel costs and loss of work days. We can assume that online distance learning will never completely replace the value of personal contact and networking derived from the traditional conference or classroom experience. But online education will offer you the convenience of learning when and where you need it, and the ability to access it based on your particular learning style.

The future of continuing education holds remarkable promise and will help us all to be better at what we do. Furthermore, we will be able to make more valuable contributions to the health information management industry. Education equals learning power and happens every day, but only if you are open to receiving it.

Discover the way you learn best and pursue your dreams. As we continue to redefine and expand the scope of health information management, I hope we will communicate with each other more often: in classrooms, at seminars, during video conferences, or on the Internet. Recent studies indicate learning something new, whatever your age may be, actually creates new nerve synapses and activates blood vessels in the brain, thus increasing its efficiency. So feed your brain, be young in spirit, and keep yourself smart and supple through continuous learning.

Notes

1. Drucker, Peter F. "Managing Oneself." *Harvard Business Review* 77, no. 2 (1999): 65.
2. White, T.H. *The Once and Future King*. New York, NY: reprinted by Ace Books, 1996.
3. Drucker, p. 66.

References

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