

# Exploring the Edges of the Profession

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*by Meg Featheringham, assistant editor*

Although John Eckmann intended to go into the public administration field, he found his true calling in health IT and HIM when he went back to school for his master's degree. "The master's degree in public health provided me an opportunity to develop my health information management interests and unite them with my working experiences in health IT," he says.

Eckmann has held a wide range of positions in his career, from health IT at an academic medical center to his current position as health informatics specialist. Now, working in collaboration with a government contractor as the project lead for an extensive EHR implementation at NASA's 14 occupational health clinics, he employs a variety of skills. "I think they hired me primarily because I'm a team leader, a strategist, a techie, a teacher, and a troubleshooter," he says.

NASA's EHR project is a work in progress. The project team is currently focused on formulation and approval efforts. "We're really detailing the plan so that we can anticipate and develop standards which will contribute to harmonization as we implement a common electronic health record system, one that's shared across the agency," Eckmann says.

## A Passion for Data

Eckmann has always been fascinated by IT and data. "When I consider the two words information technology, I'm energized more by the information than by the technology," he says. "Technology to me suggests hardware and software, but the information is produced by taking raw data and making something meaningful out of it, and that's what I like to explore."

In leading NASA's EHR project, Eckmann is assessing each of the NASA sites to determine their readiness and to better understand each site's workflows and processes. He's found a mix of systems and processes currently in place. "NASA's Occupational Health EHR Project is intended to orchestrate an agency-wide system capable of standardizing an improved level of healthcare for all employees," he says.

## Leading through Education

One of Eckmann's key roles is educating those on his team and in the NASA clinics about the EHR's intricacies. It's a process he likens to a "baptism by fire." "It's very difficult to successfully deliver that education because people are coming to these projects—particularly the EHR—from so many diverse backgrounds," he explains.

However, it's a role in which he takes great pleasure. "I really enjoy being an adult educator whereby I can help people take some technical information and assimilate that into something they can understand, get their head around, and begin to embrace the forward direction that I'm trying to characterize as the project lead."

## Exploring New Horizons

Eckmann believes that HIM professionals should expand their professional horizons in light of their evolving world. "I think they need to explore opportunities at the edge of their domain of expertise or whatever their comfort zone is with their current understanding in HIM," he says.

For instance, Eckmann suggests that as the EHR becomes the reality for more and more organizations, HIM professionals consider investigating the challenges in project management or explore other educational opportunities like learning a database management system.

They can explore challenges like process and quality improvement, he suggests, "because there is such a need to really be able to review and assess processes, not only as they are in the current state, but as they might be imagined in the electronic world."

It takes a good skill set, and it's almost an art that needs to be developed."

"People who are excited about their profession and their careers welcome the opportunity to evolve and grow with the profession."

—John Eckmann

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