



Charles LaFlèche

Hitting the Health Informatics (HI) Wall: A call to collaborative action on human resources

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COACH's definition of health informatics positions it as a field that encompasses people from many different professional backgrounds – a profession that includes multiple specialized disciplines that together seek to improve health outcomes for all Canadians. Historically, health informatics in Canada has grown organically as an industry, by attracting people from varying source disciplines, with this path being augmented in recent years by the development of new health informatics professionals through university and college programs. However, as indicated in recent HCIM&C articles by leaders from both COACH and CHITTA, the rate of growth of our industry in the era of the EHR has far outstripped the traditional supply of new entrants. A historic strength of our HI community (numbers of skilled people) is becoming a rate-limiter as we proceed along the EHR journey.

While many of us had premonitions of this human resource challenge, we have now truly 'hit the wall' in our ability to marshal the skilled human resources that we require. In fact the wall is looking more like a high and imposing cliff looming over us, which we will need to scale collectively in reaching and sustaining the much higher ongoing level of HI competencies and services that will be required on our industry's new 'plateau'. After many years of cruising on the healthcare "sea", stopping from time to time when we could for provisions and new maps, we have now landed on the beach of the promised land of the EHR...only to find after stopping on the beach to bask in the sun and get our bearings, that we now need to collectively scale the cliff or risk being swept out to sea again once the tide rises... (apologies to all true sailors for the analogy!!).

Our HI Resourcing Challenge

In the past few years, spending for e-health projects has dramatically increased. It will take a lot of money to modernize the Canadian healthcare system – and a lot of skilled human resources as well, given the complexity and importance of the task.

Does any of this sound familiar?

- The shortage of health informatics professionals is a priority issue and a significant risk to successful electronic health record initiatives (Fall 2007 Canada Health Infoway/Jurisdiction CIO Forum);
- There is a "perfect storm" brewing in the ICT labour market. Declining enrolments in computer science and engineering, the massive retirement of baby boomers and the return to robust growth in the industry will all place serious pressure on Canada's talent supply - "Coming of Age: 2007 Tech Talent Pulse Survey Report," (Deloitte Study). Similarly other "source disciplines" such as the major health professions are feeling the pinch as well. Our health informatics education programs are producing graduates – but nowhere enough to satisfy the demand;
- Public sector organizations are having problems retaining staff when salaries in the private sector are more lucrative. However, even private sector organizations are finding it hard to recruit and retain staff given the specialized HI talents needed. Supply cannot address increasing demand - resulting in project delays, deferrals and missed opportunities for addressing pressing health system business needs and improvements.

Health Informatics (HI) is the intersection of clinical, IM/IT and management disciplines to achieve better health. The HIP Core Competency Framework diagram, published in the COACH Health Informatics Professional Core Competencies, illustrates how the three source practices intersect to form the “core” body of health informatics knowledge.



The first COACH Fall Forum last November on “Recruiting and Retaining Health Informatics professionals” served to bring together a cross-section of employers, professional groups and industry and highlighted the many challenges and opportunities.

Responding to the Challenge

Recent articles in this journal have explored the challenges, described some of the initiatives that are beginning to address key facets of the challenge and made the case that we need a comprehensive industry-wide approach. Accordingly, CHITTA, COACH and the Canadian Health Information Management Association (CHIMA) have recently partnered to form a Canadian Capacity Building Strategic Steering Committee to develop an overall strategy and framework for health informatics human resources capacity.

While we know anecdotally that we face increasing challenges in attracting and retaining HI resources, we have little hard data upon which to build a sector HR strategy. One of the first collaborative initiatives is that COACH, CHITTA, CHIMA, Infoway and the Information Communications Technology Council (with the endorsement of the CIHI and the Infoway/Jurisdiction CIO forum) have partnered to plan a national sector study for health informatics (including health information management). This study will provide important data on both our current and future demand and supply picture for HI professionals, upon which we can plan as an industry. The main outputs from this project will be:

- A HI sector study survey (numbers);
- A comprehensive report that articulates the supply and demand issues for health informatics professionals in Canada (analysis);

- A dynamic supply/demand model that allows for modeling/predictions based on different supply and demand scenarios (model).

And the collaborating doesn't stop there...

Recognizing that developing the skills of our current HI professionals is another important element, COACH is also working collaboratively with healthcare employers, CIHI, CHITTA, CHIMA and HI education programs in developing a series of tools and services based on the Health Informatics Professional Core Competencies (released in 2007 and being further updated in fall 2008).

These tools and services will provide a way to analyze competency skill gaps, and with the information received on the state of those professionals across Canada, this will open new doors for working collaboratively. COACH has identified with CHIMA a number of ways in which the COACH competencies could be leveraged to also facilitate career paths for our Health Information Managers (HIMs) as one of the specialized disciplines in Health Informatics and aid certain HIM professionals in their transition to HI careers over the upcoming years. Leveraging our complementary competencies is essential if we are to support effective capacity building in the move to EHRs for all Canadians.

Some of the elements of COACH's Health Informatics Professionalism (HIP) strategy which build upon the collaborative work done in developing the core competencies include:

Professional certification – COACH is in active discussions with HIMSS about the opportunity for introducing a 'CPHIMS-CA' credential which would build upon HIMSS global certification by adding a made-in-Canada supplement which reflects the broader set of competencies that we have defined for HI in Canada.

COACH Fall Forum

The Legacy Issue: Managing Transition and Reducing Risks on the EHR Journey

November 18-19 Sheraton Centre Toronto

Topics include:

- Setting the Context – The Evolution of Legacy Systems
- The Business and Human Face of Major Migration
- Best Practices in Managing Technical Risks
- Tools & Rules of Thumb: Contracts, Relationships, Data Quality & more
- Case Studies from the UK and Alberta Physician Office System Program
- Easier Transition, Less Risk

Register online at www.coachorg.com

COACH Members: \$295 + tax Others: \$495 + tax

Questions?

Contact COACH: info@coachorg.com

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HIP@work: The COACH HIP@work project is in the midst of mapping job-level competencies to the HIP Core Competency Framework so that tools can be developed to facilitate career planning by both employers and HI professionals. As part of this work, the task force is in the process of identifying typical job descriptions to ensure that the survey respondents are able to connect "health informatics professional" to jobs found in their organization. This project is connecting a number of employers (public and private sector from different parts of the country and of different sizes).

HIP@school: The COACH HIP@school initiative is focused on drawing people into the HI profession – particularly through educational means. Participants on this project include representatives from academic program administration, as well as current students and recent graduates.

Working with other associations: Many associations worldwide are also facing similar challenges and working on the HI human resources issue – every opportunity is being leveraged to collaborate on initiatives and share developments, tools and experiences.

Immigration: While enrolments in computer science and engineering are in decline in Canada, other countries have implemented forward thinking public policies that are producing a high number of science graduates to better serve the growing digital economy. Every industrialized country in the world with low birth rates will be competing for these highly trained immigrants. As an HI community, we need to work with our Provincial and Federal immigration agencies to establish a strategy to compete for and attract these highly trained resources.

A Call for Action – Its time to Get Involved!

As your associations representing HI professionals and the HI industry, COACH and CHITTA, along with others are working together at a pan-Canadian level on strategies for addressing the escalating HI human resource challenges we are facing as a community. As organizations, though, our success will hinge on your engagement in the collaborative initiatives that we launch – stay tuned and get involved! ●

Please direct your questions, comments and ideas for Neil and Chuck to the association offices – info@coachorg.com (COACH) and info@chitta.ca (CHITTA).