



Linda Miller

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Building Capacity: Integrated, Multi-faceted Approach

In health informatics, there is no doubt about the issue of the day – ensuring we have the human resources needed to effectively use information and communications technology in healthcare to contribute to administrative and clinical best practice and, ultimately, benefit all Canadians. The related statistics are hard to come by, but it has been estimated that 10,000 people are employed in information systems-related positions alone in this country's healthcare system. A year ago, one estimate showed between 2,000 and 10,000 more people were needed in this area. Yet, less than 100 students graduate from Canadian health informatics programs annually.

Diverse, yet integrated

I believe the diverse, yet integrated nature of health informatics is a definite plus in the effort to find effective solutions to the capacity problem. As professionals made up of individuals from across the clinical, information management/information technology (IM/IT) and management disciplines, we recognize and value the importance of combining our skills for a common purpose. Every day, we draw on competencies in a wide spectrum of specialties – from project management to analysis and evaluation – to do our jobs. The knowledge, skills, attitudes, abilities and judgments we use to perform safely and effectively in a broad range of environments and practice settings and identified as 45 “core competencies” in the COACH *Health Informatics Professional Core Competencies* are important resources in addressing this challenge.

I strongly believe that we must draw on our strengths as a profession to tackle the capacity issue from several different angles, but with an integrated approach. The common thread binding these efforts together must be competency – whether we are looking at education, career development or credentialing.

To begin with, we need a baseline analysis of the profession as it now exists, as well as projections about upcoming needs. We cannot begin to plan effectively for the future without an accurate picture of where we are now. How many HI professionals are there in Canada? Where are they located? What specialties need more people? I am pleased to report that very significant progress is being made in this area through collaborations involving COACH and other health informatics, healthcare, vendor and related organizations. We are teaming up to find the answers through ground-breaking initiatives such as the upcoming Health Informatics (HI) Human Resources Sector Study, spearheaded by COACH, and the National Strategy for Capacity for Health Informatics.

Education

As in any field, the future of our profession is inextricably bound to our educational system. In the rapidly evolving field of health informatics with what often seems like a constantly growing knowledge base, quality academic programs are a must to provide students with the skills and knowledge needed in the workplace of today and tomorrow. Employers need graduates who have state-of-the-art knowledge and information technology skills. They need graduates who are fully qualified to play vital roles in organizational and health system change.

We also need to bolster awareness of the profession among students, both secondary and post-secondary, as well as people in other fields who are interested in changing careers. HI needs to be on the radar as a real, promising option for teachers and guidance counselors who guide young people across the country in making life-changing decisions about their education and future. Central to this challenge are the tasks of clearly defining what health informatics is as a

profession, plus identifying HI jobs and the skill sets, or competencies, required to fill these jobs. In an era when jobs in manufacturing and other traditional sectors are disappearing at an alarming rate, health informatics offers young Canadians a bright future and, we, as a profession, need to trumpet this message across the country.

Career Paths

Career development is another important piece of the educational package. Recent graduates, as well as experienced HI professionals and even professionals in other fields, can only benefit from guidance about advancing or changing their HI career path, in terms of acquiring the competencies needed to fill vacancies and meet needs in specific areas.

Demonstrating competency

Being a competent professional is one thing. Providing evidence of this competency to employers and the public is another issue with rich potential for HI. This is why the new COACH CPHIMSS.CA credentialing program, developed in cooperation with the respected Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS), is so important. In the long-run, this program will help establish a higher profile for the profession, along with the salaries, professional development opportunities

Share your ideas

COACH's commitment to building capacity, as reflected in our HIP Program and the Strategic Plan statement to "lead initiatives to improve the health informatics resource capacity", has never been stronger.

What are your thoughts and ideas around this issue? I am most interested to receive your input. Please contact me through the COACH office at info@coachorg.com or call 416.494.9324 or 1.888.253.8554.

and working conditions needed to attract and retain qualified people. The short-term benefits of credentialing include career development and the development of specialty credentials.

Watch for the full details about CPHIMSS.CA, consisting of the HIMSS examination and a Canadian supplement, to be announced this fall. You can also read about other COACH Health Informatics Professionalism (HIP) Program initiatives to tackle the capacity issue on page 16. ●

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