



What you need to know to be HIP – a Health Informatics Professional!

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There is great news and well...not so great news in the Canadian health informatics (HI) community today. The great news: HI is booming! There are many exciting projects taking place across the country, the electronic health record is increasingly becoming a reality and on the way to going mainstream.

The not so great news: for those in various leadership positions, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hire and retain HI staff to carry out key project and operational work. Our entire health care community is facing increasing challenges in terms of having the human resources capacity to meet the needs of health care delivery, including health information and technology initiatives.

Where do you stack up in finding, developing or even being HIP, a health informatics professional?

The first COACH Executive Forum, "Recruiting and Retaining Health Informatics Professionals: What You Need to Know and Do", was held November 14-15 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Forum attendees, ranging from human resources personnel to CIOs, from both the public and private sector, discussed recruitment and retention challenges in our diverse community.

Identified Challenges

Specific challenges identified at the Forum and evident to CIOs and others leading HI initiatives everywhere include:

- The insufficient numbers of people trained in HI (capacity in HI post-secondary programs is not close to meeting demand);
- The perception of HI as not being an exciting career (if it is seen at all!) by secondary students looking to make post-secondary educational arrangements;

- The difficulty in finding people with the right mix of skills for this specialized industry; often people are skilled in IT, but do not have the clinical knowledge to function effectively in a HI role (or vice versa); and
- The ability of experienced consultants being able to "name their price", and public sector organizations being unable to afford that price.

The Forum was highly participatory and attendees and panel members alike shared their knowledge, experience and "lessons learned." Attendees walked away with specific changed approaches to finding and keeping staff. COACH received very positive feedback about the Forum and plans to organize similar events in the future around topical issues. Comments included:

- "Congrats on the eHealth recruitment seminar - well done!"
- "The Monster (Canada) presentation offered new, out-of-the-box sourcing solutions."
- "The presentations in the 'Best Practices' session helped me understand about retention strategies."

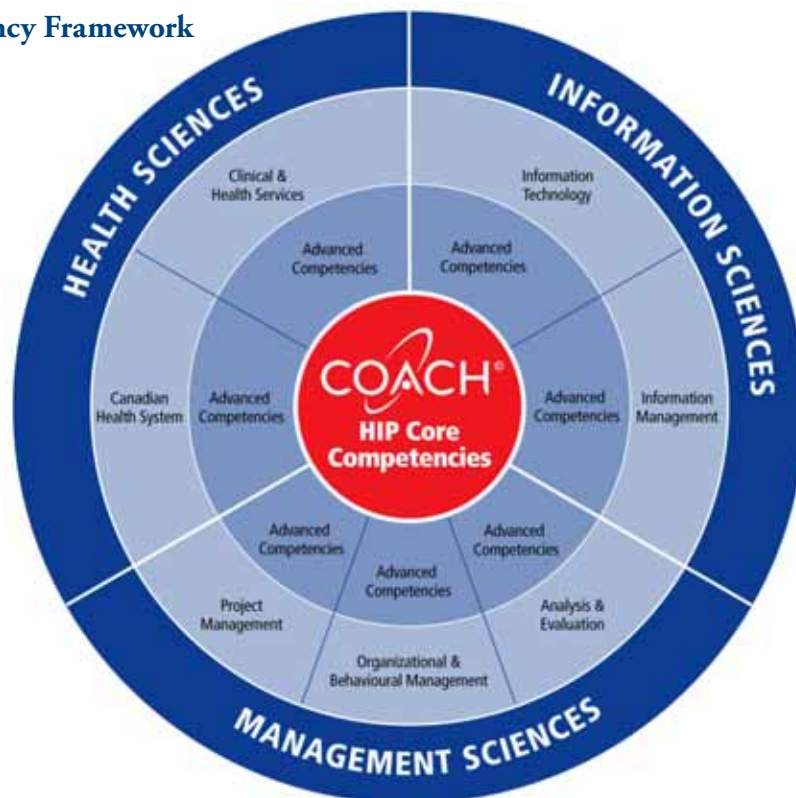
Watch for future communications from COACH on recruitment, retention and related issues that arose at the Forum.

New Core Competencies document

The Forum was also the stage for launching COACH's new Health Informatics Professional Core Competencies. The document includes a concise overarching definition of HI and provides a set of core competencies – the knowledge, skills and capabilities that multi-disciplinary HI professionals need to share in order to work together effectively. As Canada's Health Informatics Association, COACH is committed to evolving professionalism in HI. This document is a critical foundational step for advancing HI as a profession.

Included in Core Competencies is the framework diagram that illustrates how the core competencies fit into the "big picture" of HI.

HIP Competency Framework



As demonstrated in this framework, the Core Competencies document explores the three main “source disciplines” that make up HI. As COACH President Shelagh Maloney noted during the official release of Core Competencies, HI is more than just information technology! COACH’s new definition clearly outlines what is illustrated in the framework:

Health informatics is the intersection of clinical, IM/IT and management disciplines to achieve better health.

Core Competencies and the associated ethical principles (published as an appendix in the document) are the cornerstones of the COACH Health Informatics Professionalism (HIP) Program.

Neil Gardner, HIP Steering Committee Chair and a COACH board member, described the HIP Program at the Executive Forum. “The release of the Core Competencies document is only the beginning for COACH,” said Gardner. “COACH can now begin to introduce member services based on the HIP Core Competencies.” Some of the potential new services outlined in his presentation included tools for individual members and organizations to use in identifying gaps in HI skill sets and potential learning opportunities and career paths.

Although the member services are just beginning to be developed, Gardner stressed that adopting the Core Competencies document “as is” can help address many of the challenges raised in finding and keeping HI professionals, namely:

- Increasing the visibility of HI as a career of choice;
- Indicating to HI employees that the organization takes them seriously as professionals;

- If adopted by multiple organizations, it becomes easier to recruit employees using a common language. Job descriptions can be framed in terms of the core competencies; concepts which will be increasingly used across our industry.
- Identifying major skill gaps within organizations and/or departments (i.e. not enough people with specific competencies from the clinical section in the IT department).

While the recent Executive Forum was focused on the organizational issues of recruitment and retention, it is important to remember that organizations are only one “target audience” for Core Competencies. In fact, many Forum attendees are individual COACH members and HI professionals in their own right!

The Core Competencies publication is of immediate use to COACH members who would like to assess how their knowledge and skills match up against the COACH competencies. Performing this type of “reality check” provides members with a starting point for thinking about career planning and what they will need to know in order to become truly “HIP.”

A living document

Core Competencies is very much a living document; the competencies themselves will continue to evolve over time along with the profession. As COACH is a member-focused association, we encourage our organizational and individual members to let us know the innovative ways in which they are using Core Competencies. ●