

Breaking into the Healthcare IT Employment Market

By Stowe Blankenship

As recruiters, we spend our work lives speaking with you about yours. Many of our candidates are seasoned professionals in the Healthcare IT (HIT) market and many others are looking to get in. Since we frequently discuss career history with those on the inside, we hear many stories about how our candidates' careers brought them to the industry. Though everyone's progression is unique, there are some common patterns that we can share to help other job seekers visualize how they can pursue a career in HIT.

Since I am an example, I will digress by telling my own story first. I began my career in the field as a network engineer for a technical services firm that specialized in network communications and technical support for businesses. Since two of our key players in the business were former network engineers at a local hospital, we had a strong contact base from day one in the local healthcare community. After demonstrating understanding of the healthcare business, word quickly spread among local physician practices and community hospitals to the point that we were providing services to dozens of physician offices and several hospitals. As the primary technical contacts for many of our customers, we were often involved in implementations and upgrades of Electronic Medical Record (EMR) applications to provide the appropriate infrastructure to run the systems. I soon realized that applications drove the HIT industry and began to make a point of familiarizing myself with each application and the vendor teams. In our business, it was also apparent that this was a growing industry that had good stability. During the dot.com bust, when many IT firms had difficulty, we hardly felt a thing. Ultimately, I decided that combining the strengths of both IT and healthcare was a winning career combination that I would be happy to stick with so I joined the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) and made sure to stay up to date on industry news. Subsequently, I spent several years in technology sales focusing on the IT needs of healthcare clients before joining Intellect Resources as a recruiter.

Entering HIT from the technical side is a common path and many others also get started as healthcare professionals, project managers and salespeople. Though you certainly cannot account for every situation that leads someone into this field, I will cover each of the professions above with some observations and recommendations in hopes that you will have an idea of the progressions and options that are most common, beginning with IT professionals. As I mentioned before, applications drive this industry, so bear in mind that my discussion will focus on the fact that the most valuable experience you can gain is working with our major industry applications and technologies.

IT Professionals:

Obviously, the IT field is huge and diverse and the collection of skills available can make your head spin. However, healthcare is a business and all businesses need IT. Whether you have experience as a programmer, database administrator, web developer, network engineer, server administrator, help desk tech or any other IT skill, your skills are valuable in healthcare. The most common paths for IT professionals to enter HIT are working in your technical skill area for a hospital, clinic, physician practice or HIT vendor. Working for a vendor, you will gain experience quickly with their applications. In hospitals,

clinics and large physician practices, there are often other employees or even large teams that will focus specifically on supporting the HIT applications in your environment. Your challenge, then, is to look for opportunities to become familiar with the applications so that you can become involved in the application projects. Often, this is as easy as volunteering to assist on a project. You can certainly improve your odds by taking it upon yourself to get to know the applications on your own while you are performing other duties like supporting users. Finally, you will benefit from learning the processes and work involved in caring for patients to develop healthcare knowledge and rapport with clinicians. Your key strength is that you understand technology already and your goal is to become experienced with how HIT applications provide value to clinicians to help them care for patients more efficiently and effectively. Once you are knowledgeable with an application, the most common career options are working for a vendor, hospital or consulting firm as an Analyst, Application Builder, Interfacing/Integration Developer, Project Manager or Trainer.

Healthcare Professional:

For the purpose of discussion, I am referring to healthcare professionals as anyone that works in a business or clinical capacity for a healthcare provider (hospital, clinic, physician practice, etc.) Many of the jobs in the HIT field desire employees with healthcare experience and this is your key strength. Since you are already familiar with the workflow of patient care, it is already second nature for you to understand the needs of those who care for patients and you are experienced with communicating on their terms. Your main challenge and goal is obtaining experience and understanding of the technical aspects that are usually handled by IT staff. Technology may not be your background and comfort zone. However, most healthcare professionals usually have regular access to the software used in your environment so you have the advantage of being a user. Most healthcare professionals begin their HIT careers as users of a software application, for instance, as a nurse entering patient information into an electronic record. To progress toward a career in HIT, you will want to become as familiar as possible with the software that you use for your work. As you gain experience, you should be able to become what is referred to as a 'super user,' which basically means that you are a proficient go-to employee among your peers for how to use the application. You may get this through training or just good old on the job experience. Once you are very proficient with an application, your opportunities will begin to open up for transitioning into a more technical role. Common paths for you are training fellow employees, working as an analyst to help design and validate the function of an application and project management. Career options will often be working for a vendor, hospital or consulting firm as an Analyst, Project Manager or Trainer.

Project Manager:

Every large business needs experienced project managers and healthcare is no different. Implementing HIT applications are often major undertakings that take years to complete and cost millions of dollars. The strong organizational skills and project management know-how of project managers are essential for the success of these endeavors and this is your key strength. Your main challenge and goal is to gain experience in the healthcare industry by working for a firm that provides project management services to healthcare providers, particularly hospitals. Of course, managing technological projects in a clinical setting will be best. Strong project management skills are always in demand and the most common paths into HIT are working as a project manager for a hospital or HIT vendor. You will want to focus on developing skills with the applications in your environment to further your career.

Salespeople:

As we often hear in the sales profession, "Sales is sales." If you are already an experienced salesperson, there are options for you in HIT. Your key strength is that you already know how to sell and build sales relationships. Your goal is to work for a business that sells into healthcare, preferably in a clinical area, and these options are far too numerous to go over here. What you need to obtain most is an understanding of the business of patient care and how to build rapport with healthcare professionals.

Working in a role that sells technology, particularly software or technical services is even better. Your options in HIT will most often be in sales or business development with an HIT vendor or HIT consulting firm.

Now that we have covered the most common paths into a career in HIT, one more consideration remains that influences your options – whether or not you are interested in traveling for work. If you do not want to travel, your employment options will usually be either working as an employee of a healthcare provider or an in-house staff member for an HIT vendor. For candidates that are open to travel, you will have employment options with consulting firms and HIT vendors.