

Working in health information technology

New Zealand health IT specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose IT and what do you like most?

It is exciting to be involved in an area that is emergent and rapidly changing. The field of IT is constantly developing so the job always involves something interesting and new. Working in this area gives you the opportunity to stretch your mind since there is no limit to the possibilities. It also enables those who enjoy the clinical process to continue participating, just in a different way.

What strengths and abilities make a good health IT specialist?

You need to have excellent IT skills and should be able to keep up with the fast-paced changes in this field. It is also important to have some familiarity with the business world as much of the work deals with budgets, risk and management. You need to be able to analyse industry trends and balance these with value creation, leveraging the benefits of technology to assist with the delivery of health care information. Much of the work is self-directed so you need to be well-organised, motivated and able to plan ahead.

Dealing with management and IT professionals may be very different from your experience in clinical medicine so you need to be adaptable. Good communication and leadership skills are important, since the role involves negotiating with doctors and IT professionals and dealing effectively with conflict between these groups. You also need to be able to convey business requirements to software developers to ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness of the resulting products and services.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

There are virtually no predictable daily schedules, which is one of the appealing aspects of working in this area. You may travel to another city or country for work commitments. You may hold meetings with clients or attend internal company meetings, or you may spend time defining a screen layout for a new application. The day can start at 6.00am or 11.00am; it might finish at 6.00pm or, when you are approaching a deadline, it may not end at all. Many of the activities during the day are organisational and could include planning, ensuring that priorities are set appropriately, and overseeing the completion of work activities according to those priorities.

What do you think are the future challenges of health IT?

IT is becoming increasingly important in the field of medicine, and its role is growing ever-more complex. Health care personnel who are able to understand technology and the health care industry and who have business capabilities are highly sought-after. Those who possess little formal business training but wish to pursue this career path may face the challenge of learning new skills in environments that are often pressured.

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in health IT?

If you are thinking of moving into this area it is recommended that you undertake broad clinical training first, to gain insight into the health system from a doctor's point of view (which is something that most IT professionals do not have). It may be helpful, for example, to have a thorough understanding of hospital management and the ways in which hospitals function so that potential problems can be minimised if a new computer system is to be installed.

One IT specialist said that the transition from clinician to IT professional is not always easy because you must learn all over again, effectively as an apprentice. IT is, however, seen as a rewarding area in which to work since it is often basic skills such as diligence and interpersonal capabilities that define success.

What are future opportunities in health IT?

The projections for work in this area are good, providing the IT industry stays buoyant. There is currently a shortage of doctors undertaking full time careers in IT, although many doctors maintain clinical work and devote some of their time to IT activities. It seems inevitable that the overall demand will continue to grow, both for clinicians who understand IT and for IT experts who are also clinicians.

What is the work/life balance like?

One contributor commented that it is very realistic to take time out in this discipline and that there is not the same need for CME and continuing collegial participation as there is in clinical medical practice. The skills, knowledge and expertise that are required in IT are all universal so there is scope for employment internationally.

The regular hours are similar to those of a GP and there is little or no on-call commitment, so the impact on family life is generally low. There can, however, be very intensive bursts of activity: you may work 16 hours each day, seven days a week, for a number of weeks or months during critical development or implementation periods. The pattern depends very much on the particular company that you work for and its growth velocity. There are many opportunities to work overseas, which may have an impact (positive or negative) on family circumstances.

What are the disadvantages of health IT?

One IT specialist said that there is much higher career risk than in the general medical profession and unless you are prepared to take that risk, financial rewards will be lower than those for clinical health care delivery. Moving once more into the role of a relatively junior member of a team can make the transition to working in this industry difficult.

Any comments on the current training?

In order to maintain career options you should aim to keep up-to-date with both IT and clinical medicine. Although there is no formal training programme for this career choice, it is worth undertaking a postgraduate diploma in IT. Many clinicians who are interested in IT have already undertaken to teach themselves some basic skills. In this case, a course may effectively function as a cross-check to ensure the appropriate scope of your knowledge and to provide some insight into

business issues. Diploma, certificate or Masters courses in Health Informatics are run by a number of universities and in many cases, can be undertaken as distance learning programmes. Recommended courses are:

- Postgraduate Diploma in Health Informatics – The University of Otago
www.otago.ac.nz/subjects/hein.html
- Diploma in Medical Informatics -The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh
www.diploma.rcsed.ac.uk