PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING FOR HEALTH INFORMATION MANAGEMENT/TECHNOLOGY STUDENTS AND NEW GRADUATES: A SURVEY OF HIM PROFESSIONALS IN MICHIGAN

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Professional Networking for Health Information Management/Technology Students and New Graduates: A Survey of HIM Professionals in Michigan

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Abstract

The purpose of this survey was to gather advice on professional networking to assist health information management/technology students and new graduates. An online survey was sent to members of the Michigan Health Information Management Association (MHIMA) through a series of e-mails with 119 responses. Open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative summative content analysis. Overall trends identified from the advice were to be active in the health information management (HIM) community and engage in positive relationships while avoiding negative or self-centered behaviors. Online networking activities were also recommended to be included in the process although not as the only means of networking. Attending regional and state HIM association events and volunteering with regional associations were selected most often as effective networking activities.

Keywords: professional networking, health information management (HIM), career development, students, new graduates

Introduction

Many college students and new graduates have heard networking is important to their career

development.[1] The challenge is determining what networking is and how to go about doing it. Michigan Health Information Management Association (MHIMA) members were asked to share their thoughts on professional networking to help guide students and new graduates. In reviewing literature regarding networking, there are many different definitions and proposed outcomes.

Addams[2] suggests identifying and communicating what successful networking looks like is relatable to answering the question "what does salt taste like?" A person who has tasted salt knows the taste yet may find it difficult to explain without simply responding "salty". Similarly, a person who has successfully established relationships with a network of colleagues knows what it looks and feels like, yet those who haven't may have difficulty understanding how to network. There are many opinions regarding networking, types of networking, antecedents to and outcomes of networking although relatively little regarding the topic of advice or instructing those new to the workforce how to do it. This is the intent of this study – to ask current Health Information Management (HIM) professionals and future HIM colleagues open ended questions regarding the advice they would give to students and new graduates regarding networking. It is hoped the overall trends identified from responses can provide insight to students and new graduates who are seeking to grow their professional network.

Background

Health Information Management

Health information management (HIM) is "the practice of acquiring, analyzing, and protecting digital and traditional medical information vital to providing quality patient care. It is a combination of business, science, and information technology."[3] The state of Michigan has one graduate degree program, four bachelor degree programs, and six associate degree programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM).[4] The programs qualify graduates to sit for the Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA) and Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT) exams through the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA). "Founded in 1928, AHIMA is the premier association of health information management (HIM) professionals worldwide. Serving 52 affiliated component state associations and more than 103,000 health information professionals, AHIMA is the leading authority for "HIM knowledge" and widely respected for its esteemed credentials and rigorous professional education and training."[5] The Michigan Health Information Management Association is a Component State Association of AHIMA. There are also local/regional associations which are formed within an area of a state and work in partnership with the state association. Michigan has four regional associations: Southeast Michigan, West Michigan, Lake Huron, and Upper Peninsula.[6]

Professional Networking

A review of literature was conducted using online databases seeking articles related to professional networking. There were many results investigating social networking which were not considered for this review. Certainly, the image a person projects online even on social networking sites may have career implications,[7] although the focus of this study is advice for students pursuing professional networking skills. Most of the research found related to defining networking, antecedents to networking, or the outcomes/benefits of networking relationships. Literature is spread through many disciplines and no consensus of the many aspects has been reached – including definition or best way to measure in a study.[8] Recommended steps of what to actually do while networking was not addressed in most of the studies.

There are multiple definitions of professional networking. Gibson, Hardy, and Buckley[9] seem to have crafted an inclusive definition of networking "goal-directed behavior which occurs both inside and outside of an organization, focusing on creating, cultivating, and utilizing interpersonal relationships."[9(p146)] Most definitions include relationships to exchange information, benefits, influence, opportunities, and access to resources for mutual benefit. These relationships have been found to help in obtaining new roles,[10] career success,[11] salary progression, and access to information for job

performance.[12] The benefits and definitions found in the literature encompass more than seeking and obtaining employment. Students and new graduates may want to keep this in mind when thinking about their professional network.

Even within activities considered to be professional networking, different types were identified in the literature. Networking can be individual, job level, organizational, ethical, unethical, face-to-face, and online through networking websites. Networking is related to, although different from topics such as mentoring, social networks (due to different goals and intents), political skill, or impression management.[13]

Most recommendations gained from current peer-reviewed literature comes from advice or metareview articles. Also, there are advice books and articles in non-scholarly magazines although research has lagged behind.[14] Advice for positive, ethical networking for the mutual benefit of all parties found in the literature includes:

- Say thank you, connect with people even when there is nothing needed or no current issue to solve[15]
- Join clubs, fraternities/sororities, student associations to practice communication and relationship building[16]
- Work every day to expand your network (it does take work)[17]
- Help others when you see a need arise[18]
- "Don't wait until you need a job to start being outgoing. It takes years to build a network of friends in the business, and one must maintain those relationships with phone call, e-mails, or chit-chat. Networking is fun, rewarding, and good insurance for the security of your career in your lifetime"[19(p218)]
- "Talk about your professional interests with others, and emphasize what you can do for them"[20(p217)]
- Attend professional conferences for opportunities to meet like-minded people[21,22,23]
- Prepare beforehand what you are going to do to interact with people at the conference[24]
- While attending conferences, spend time engaging new ideas and people instead of collecting marketing materials and business cards from booths[25]

Mele recommends following ethical professional networking practices when building a professional network. When engaging in the examples listed above some ethical networking guidelines include:[26]

- Acting in good faith, sharing honest goals, participating in lawful activities
- Sharing information, knowledge, and resources with reciprocity and gratitude
- Serving with justice in asymmetric power relationships
- Exercising positive ethical influence with the network

Acting in bad faith, abusing or misusing power, or abusing the trust of a colleague are unethical actions to be avoided. Cronyism, bribery, and predatory opportunism are also unethical actions which are not to be mistaken or construed to be networking.[27]

The ideas identified in previous studies and reviews do give some advice regarding professional networking which seems to be generalizable to many professions and career-levels. Hopefully this review of literature and responses of the study will also result in useful advice specifically for health information management students and new graduates.

Barriers

There are multiple barriers reported in the literature which can be stumbling blocks for students and new graduates. Many people find both in-person and online networking intimidating,[28] especially students who may not have the confidence to contact or follow-up with potential employers.[29] After meeting new people at a conference it is easy to lose momentum in following up.[30] When looking to connect online, one study of health administration students and found 72 percent had engaged in social networking online, yet only 27 percent had used a professional networking website. Whether it be a social or professional networking, students have reported they are unsure of online "rules"[31] and would like to hear more advice regarding networking online. In another study, students felt employers had perceptions of what a college graduate "should be," which in reality didn't match the diverse pool of students and graduates. Students felt as though they did not fit what idea employers had in mind.[32]

Advice to overcome these barriers for students and new graduates includes early involvement in networking while still in college. Alumni in one study advised students and faculty regarding the necessity of networking with employers before graduation. "Linking current students to those in the field, primarily though internships, was viewed by alumni as essential to developing ongoing opportunities for students to network and gain access to a challenging job market."[33(p63)] Students like to hear specific real-life scenarios of networking to learn from whether it be from alumni, current practitioners in the field, or faculty. Practicing developing relationships—personal and professional—is recommended to overcome some of these barriers.[34] As far as developing online professional relationships, students reported a desire to learn about professionally appropriate online activities.[35]

Gaps

Gibson's metareview suggested more open-ended/qualitative research to better understand nuances and distinguish networking behaviors. Currently, most attention in research has been to antecedents and outcomes. In order to move forward more should be on the mechanisms which drive success, and what behaviors translate to success.[36]

Methods

An online survey with open-ended questions was selected to gather this data in order to reach more people than could be accomplished with individual interviews. Data was gathered using an online survey link. The link was distributed by MHIMA to all state association members via a series of e-mails and announced in their quarterly FOCUS newsletter. It was also posted online in the AHIMA Engage communities of practice Michigan CSA forum. The total population that could have been reached at the time with the internet survey link included the total MHIMA membership of 3,291 HIM professionals and students.[37]

The survey was intended to be short to encourage completion by potential participants. It included two demographic questions, three open-ended questions regarding professional networking, and one multiple-selection question. Potential respondents consented to participating by continuing with the survey after reading the informed consent information. Participants could discontinue the survey at any time and were free to decline to answer any question. The survey and methods were reviewed and approved by a university Institutional Review Board.

The two demographic questions asked participants what their HIM role was and where they were located. Options for role included current student or those who graduated within the previous year, faculty, or HIM professional (not faculty/student/new graduate). Students and recent graduates were included because they could have successful strategies to share with others. Locations were categorized as urban or rural using State of Michigan and U.S. Census guidelines.[38]

Open-ended responses were categorized into groups based on the emerging trends of responses. The categories were not pre-selected; however, through the review of literature some ideas of potential trends, and terms such as relating to relationship-building and involvement in professional groups were identified. The final trends were formed based on responses from the participants. This followed the qualitative coding procedure of summative content analysis outlined by Hsieh and Shannon.[39] Each response was assigned a grouping based on what trend it most closely aligned with. An individual's open-ended response could result in multiple pieces of advice which may have been recorded in more than one category. For example, if one response included three suggestions, then each suggestion was categorized.

The final question asked participants to select what they felt were the best five networking activities

out of 17 suggestions. There was also an option for entering a suggestion not listed. The question did not seek a 1-5 ranking, only selecting what group of five suggestions the respondent felt were most effective. A strict ranking was not pursued because the goal was to gather information on successful strategies, not stratify or grade them individually. The results then communicate which suggestions were most often selected as an effective networking activity. For example, the activity gaining the most responses indicates it was included the most in top five suggestions, yet not necessarily ranked number one by the most respondents.

Results

A total of 119 current HIM professionals, faculty, college students, and new graduates responded to the survey. Of the 119 responses, 21 were students or had graduated within the last year, 18 were educators in college or university health information degree programs, and 79 were working in the healthcare industry. One person chose not to identify their role.   Of the 119 respondents, 97 (82 percent) were located in an urban area, and 22 (18 percent) were located in a rural area.

The first open-ended question asked what professional networking advice you have for students and new graduates. Most suggestions followed the trends of participating or volunteering in activities, seeking to build relationships, leveraging internships or work experiences, and utilizing online networking strategies. The totals are listed below.

- Participating/Volunteering – 65
- Relationship Building – 28
- Internships/Experiences – 12
- Online Strategies – 4
- Other - 11

The second open-ended question asked participants to share what specific networking examples they recommend. In grouping the activities suggested, they formed the following trends:

- Involvement in Professional Associations – 67
- Utilizing Online Networking Websites – 23
- Initiate Personal Relationships – 21
- Involvement in School Events/Groups – 19
- Being Open-Minded to New Experiences & Opportunities – 15
- Job Shadowing – 8
- Display Professional Behavior – 3
- Other – 4

The third open-ended question asked what participants would recommend students and new graduates avoid when professional networking. The responses trended into the following groups of behaviors to avoid:

- Aggressive or Nagging – 18
- Unprofessional Behavior or Attire – 17
- Gossip or "Burning Bridges" – 16
- Being Closed-Minded – 14
- Self-Centered Discussions or Behavior – 8
- Shyness – 8
- Using Only Technology/Online Strategies – 6
- Neglecting Relationships – 5
- Other – 11

The final question of the survey asked participants about specific networking activities. Seventeen activities were suggested with an option to also write-in activities not listed. Participants were asked to select five of the networking activities they believed were most effective for HIM students and new graduates. The activities suggested are listed in **Table 1** and the five activities selected most are detailed below.

- Attending local/regional HIM association continuing education conference/seminars – 99 (83 percent)
- Attending state HIM association (Component State Association - CSA) continuing education conferences/seminars – 69 (58 percent)
- Volunteering with the local/regional HIM association – 58 (49 percent)
- Seeking job shadowing opportunities – 55 (46 percent)
- Online networking with LinkedIn or similar websites – 49 (41 percent)

Discussion

Response to the survey was 3.6 percent of the estimated population of AHIMA certified or affiliated HIM professionals in Michigan. This is a low percent of the estimated pool of possible participants; however, the goal of the study was to gather as much helpful information as possible for new and future professionals. It is felt the advice gathered is useful to students and new graduates regardless of the response rate to the survey.

Conducting interviews with a smaller number of people would have also been an option to collect information regarding professional networking. Most responses to the open-ended questions on the survey were a few sentences or less, while interviews could have possibly collected more information from each participant. It would have allowed for a deeper qualitative examination of suggestions and been easier to share specific examples from each person. In this case, gathering advice from over 100 colleagues does provide a broad overview of activities to pursue and could lead to valuable guidance. Attempting to share every specific example from each person in a publication would result in a very long list. Even though each individual suggestion is not included here, it is felt the overall trends can be useful information for students and new graduates to know

when networking.

The trends from each open-ended question seem to align with professional networking suggestions in the literature review. Most responses valued being active in the HIM community and engaging in positive relationships while avoiding negative or self-centered behaviors. Online networking activities were also recommended to be included in the process although not as the only means of networking. This is encouraging to know in cases where physical attendance at events may be limited due to funds, distance, or health and safety factors. Respondents to the survey felt the regional and state health information management associations were valuable assets to networking. Attending events and volunteering in the associations were some of the most popular options when recommending effective networking activities.

Conclusion

The intent of this study was to provide support and advice to health information management and health information technology students as they begin their careers. The results may also help faculty and current HIM professionals to advise and encourage new and future colleagues. The literature review and survey responses recommend being involved in activities of regional and state HIM associations. Pursuing positive relationship-building, avoiding being overly aggressive regarding jobs, and refraining from unprofessional behavior and conversation were also recommended. Additional recommendations included incorporating online methods into professional networking activity. Even though professional networking has been found to have many benefits, employment opportunities seem to be the reason most people think of first. People are hired for job expertise not who knows who – yet sincere relationships help communicate your skills and character.[40] The recommendations of over 100 HIM professionals will hopefully help those new in their HIM career to meet colleagues and establish meaningful relationships.

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Author

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There are no comments yet.