



Why healthcare? To make a difference

By Amanda Mewborn

Recently, I was asked why I work in healthcare when industrial engineers have so many other opportunities.

This questioner noted that working in healthcare is more difficult because the product (i.e., the patient) has so much variation. The healthcare sector also is replete with highly skilled workers – namely doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, therapists, administrators and many others. The person argued that this workforce makes it more challenging to change and improve processes.

These good points deserve a few counterpoints that influenced my career choice.

First, the opportunity to make an impact on the lives of millions of people originally drew me to healthcare. At some point, everyone needs healthcare, often when one is most vulnerable. The system is mainly targeted toward sick people, and people don't feel great when they are sick. Selecting a career in healthcare means helping others when they need it most.

Another attraction is healthcare's mission to provide care, whereas many other industries focus on the bottom line. While financial success is important, most healthcare organizations emphasize making decisions in the best interest of the patient (customer) first. Other priorities fall after that.

Healthcare work is done primarily with people and processes rather than with machines and technology. As an extrovert, I gain energy from interact-

ing with others. Healthcare is a perfect match for me since the majority of my work is done in multidisciplinary teams with other people who have diverse thoughts. In working with others, I am constantly learning, and my thought processes are being challenged. I'm growing every day through work.

The variety keeps me challenged, engaged and motivated to continue learning.

Healthcare is a giant industry. According to the World Health Organization, the United States spent 17.1 percent of its GDP on healthcare in 2013, the highest rate worldwide. Canada, Japan, France, Germany, Austria, Serbia, Sierra Leone and Liberia have rates higher than 10 percent as well. Such enormous spending presents remarkable opportunities for improving healthcare outcomes and reducing costs.

Healthcare will always be needed. Further, demographic shifts and lifestyle choices are driving increasing burdens on the healthcare industry. Many groups within healthcare are concerned about the impact of the "baby boomer" generation on the industry. Baby boomers, or people born between 1946 and 1964, represent about one-third of the U.S. population. As this generation ages, the demand on the healthcare system will increase beyond its current capabilities.

Economics tells us that high demand with low supply will increase prices, which brings about ethical dilemmas in who receives scarce healthcare resources. Creating more capacity through improvements in the way care is delivered is a talent unique to IEs.

Another appealing aspect is how industrial engineering skills can be applied to a variety of healthcare implementations. Opportunities include project management, operational and process analysis, facilitation of performance improvement teams, staffing analysis and establishment of productivity standards, facility design, capacity analysis, forecasting and budgeting and training others on IE concepts. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to apply my IE skills in a variety of settings. This variety keeps me challenged, engaged and motivated to continue learning and seeking ways to make a difference in healthcare.

Having spent my entire career in healthcare, I cannot imagine a more rewarding opportunity for an IE. There are so many reasons to give healthcare a second look. The healthcare industry needs you. Learn more on the Society for Health Systems website at www.societyforhealthsystems.org. ♦

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