Advances in technology and the growing integration of medical equipment with information technology (IT) are changing the skill sets necessary for healthcare technology management (HTM) professionals to perform their jobs. As the field rapidly evolves on a technical level, HTM professionals also are expected to communicate and address the needs of individuals outside their departments—from patients, to vendors, to hospital administrators.

HTM’s expanding reach into other departments and disciplines brings with it a growing need for soft skills training. Unlike hard skills, which are specific, measurable qualities and abilities, soft skills refer to behaviors for effective and friendly interactions with other people. Examples of soft skills include:

- Communication
- Courtesy/customer focus
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Integrity
- Interpersonal skills
- Positive attitude/passion
- Professionalism
- Responsibility
- Teamwork
- Work ethic

Without these skills, many in the field will feel underprepared when they are inevitably tasked with resolving workplace conflicts and developing professional relationships or as they transition into leadership positions.

Bi&T interviewed several members of the HTM community to learn more about the growing importance of soft skills training during various career stages, as well as how and where these techniques are being taught.

Soft Skills in HTM Training Curricula

People who consider careers in HTM are typically problem solvers; HTM training programs reinforce this mindset by fostering a strong sense of critical thinking and linear troubleshooting. Although these programs prepare students to perform the complex mechanical tasks they will face every day, “the curricula don’t always include enough instruction in the interpersonal skills students will need to communicate effectively with customers,” said Eric Aring, clinical systems engineer at Stanford Children’s Health in Palo Alto, CA. “This is unfortunate because we are now truly a customer-facing profession.”

John Noblitt, director of the Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute in Hudson, NC, has instructed healthcare technology students for nearly 30 years. Fortunately for his students, Noblitt is a strong proponent of soft skills training and the biomedical equipment technician (BMET) education program he directs includes lectures...
on customer management and public speaking, as well as cooperative education and internship opportunities.

Noblitt tells his students that they need to study and learn the skills required for certification; however, grades alone will not define their worth as BMETs. “In addition to technical know-how, I tell my students they need to understand their customers’ psychology,” said Noblitt. “Customers only call when something is going wrong and they are stressed out. Before you fix the equipment, you need to ‘fix’ the customer.”

Joe Deater, adjunct instructor at Northwestern Michigan College and BMET III at Munson Healthcare (both located in Traverse City, MI), also believes soft skills training is integral to a technician’s success. Formal soft skills instruction was not something he had the opportunity to experience when he entered the HTM field more than 20 years ago. Instead, he said he learned about teamwork and communication during his time with the U.S. Air Force and picked up interpersonal skills by generally being a sociable, outgoing person.

Deater recently petitioned to have soft skills training added to Northwestern Michigan’s Biomedical Engineering Technologies Program, which is part of the college’s Engineering Technology Program. Now, Deater’s students are required to complete courses in technical writing, professional communication, and critical thinking in order to earn their degree.

If your training program does not offer classes in soft skills, there are external sources for instruction, such as LinkedIn Learning videos and seminars sponsored by professional associations (see sidebar on this page). Codi Nelson, team leader and BMET III for Crothall Services at Iredell Health System in Statesville, NC, suggested that aspiring HTM leaders “check out your local Toastmasters International Club or pick up a book. I highly recommend anything by Ken Blanchard, Patrick Lencioni, or John Maxwell or published by Harvard Business Review.”

**Soft Skills and Career Advancement**

“Soft skills will help you keep a job, and they’ll also get you to your next one,” said Chris Moreau, biomedical engineer and senior research coordinator at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. “Being able to read a room, for example, will directly translate to successful interactions with everyone—from members of the clinical team to patients.”

In addition to interpersonal skills, learning how to adapt to a changing work environment will benefit any member of the HTM field. Technological advances are changing the nature of HTM jobs and of HTM departments as a whole.

“There has been a trend toward making HTM more of a value-added department instead of a reactive fix-it shop. In order to

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**Quotes from the Field**

- **John Noblitt:** “I’ve seen students with average grades and great interpersonal skills get employment offers over students with higher marks because they can really sell themselves as the best person for the job.”

- **Mike Busdicker:** “What’s the difference between an introverted engineer and an extroverted engineer? The extroverted engineer looks at your shoes instead of their own shoes!”

- **Chris Moreau:** “I believe soft skills are the most important thing you can teach a mentee and one of the biggest things that contributed to my success.”

- **Joe Deater:** “Most biomedical technicians I’ve met over the years would fall into the introvert category, and I believe that has contributed to a lack of promoting jobs in healthcare technology. In turn, that has led to the point we are at now—a shortage of new techs coming into the field.”

- **Samantha Jacques:** “You can’t fix problems in the C-suite with a hammer. You need a different set of tools to be a successful leader.”

- **Codi Nelson:** “Becoming a better leader is a continual and evolving effort. It’s a never-ending process.”

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AAMI Resource: Mentorship Program

The AAMI mentorship program pairs members who are looking for guidance with those who have expertise on a variety of healthcare technology topics. The goals of the program are to help protégés develop the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed and grow in the healthcare technology field, to provide a venue for them to discuss issues or concerns that are unique to healthcare technology professionals, and to encourage long-term career planning.

For more information, visit www.aami.org/mentorship.

make that transition possible, every member of the HTM team—management and staff—need to focus on soft skills,” said Samantha Jacques, director of clinical engineering at Penn State Health in Hershey, PA, and a member of the BI&T Editorial Board.

Current HTM professionals likely will have available options for soft skills instruction. Some employers have formal mentor-protégé programs through which newer employees develop professional skills from those who are more experienced. Human resources departments may also sponsor professional improvement classes for their staff, such as those offered by Six Sigma. These sessions are not HTM specific, but the lessons (e.g., public speaking, time management) often are general enough to be applied to any position.

If your employer does not offer soft skills instruction, you could look to your management team for guidance. Mike Busdicker, systems director for clinical engineering at Intermountain Healthcare in Salt Lake City, UT, said he brings soft skills to his staff by getting them involved and communicating with frontline caregivers and clinical staff.

This interaction, said Busdicker, “helps them better understand the unique needs of each department we work with. This kind of communication can be a challenge for technical personnel, who trend toward introversion, but it is necessary.”

Moreau offered up a more hands-on option for soft skills training at work. “I’m probably alone with this opinion, but I don’t think observational training is very useful. You need something that’s interactive. For example, ask to volunteer in the emergency department (ED) at a nearby large hospital. Spending time in the ED will expose you to nearly every kind of medical situation with patients, caregivers, and hospital support staff who are under a great amount of stress. The people you interact with in the ED will not be shy about offering up honest, on-the-spot feedback on your performance.”

Moving Up to the C-Suite

Senior executive roles, often referred to as the C-suite, include titles that begin with “chief” (e.g., chief information officer [CIO], chief information security officer [CISO]). If you are considering a position in the C-suite, you absolutely need to have a solid grasp of soft skills.

“HTM professionals start as problem solvers,” said Jacques. “The transition to leadership can be challenging because you need switch from a problem-solving mindset to a more visionary and strategic way of thinking. You are going to crash and burn in
As the director of information services (IS) and clinical engineering services at Allina Health System in Minneapolis, MN, Nadia Ayoubzadeh noticed that IS and clinical engineering services were becoming increasingly critical to healthcare delivery. In 2016, Ayoubzadeh led the launch of a new customer service training program that focuses on developing soft skills for IS and clinical engineering employees. “Historically, our industry has been known to work in the basement with minimal interactions,” she said. “Now, however, we are much more visible as technology takes a more prominent role in the healthcare environment. This requires a more refined set of soft skills and the ability to interact effectively at all levels of the organization and with external partners.”

To set up Allina’s IS and clinical engineering employees for success, Ayoubzadeh pitched the idea of a customer service training program to the CIO. In her case for the program, Ayoubzadeh said the department could not expect its employees to deliver exceptional customer service without first defining the concept and that this would require creating a culture and shared language around excellent customer service.

With the CIO’s support, Ayoubzadeh recruited a few of her colleagues to design and deliver a customer service training program for Allina’s IS and clinical engineering employees.

“Our people are technical in nature,” she said, “so we made sure to incorporate scientific research that explained the social science behind how we interact with others and the value soft skills add to these interactions.”

In the first year of the new program, called Our Promise, more than 850 employees from IS and clinical engineering completed the two-hour foundations course. The foundations course breaks down each step of a customer interaction and defines the soft skills and tools employees need in order to provide great service:

- **Positive greeting.** A genuine greeting makes the customer feel welcome and sets the tone for current and future interactions.
- **Respectful listening.** Pay attention to the words the customer is saying and try to understand the complete message.
- **Obtain clarity.** Confirm with the customer that you understand their issues and needs.
- **Manage expectations.** Make sure the customer understands how and when you will address their issues and needs.
- **Initiate collaboration.** If you cannot resolve the customer’s issues and needs, reach out to others who can help.
- **Solution driven.** Stay focused on providing solutions that are integrated with the organization’s mission and values.
- **Express gratitude.** Close your interaction with sincere thanks.

The foundations program comes with a 30-page resource guide that includes additional information about these steps, as well as lessons in understanding body posture and facial expressions, tips for active listening, email etiquette, apologizing gracefully, and recovering from a breakdown in customer service.

In the second year of the program, the Our Promise team developed manager toolkits to facilitate customer service discussions during staff meetings and released a video series, Our Promise in Action, that highlights examples of exceptional customer service at Allina. They also hosted deep-dive sessions on key topics like managing upset customers and collaboration, with a deep dive on gratitude planned for November to coincide with Thanksgiving.

“We will talk about how gratitude fits into the customer service experience and how it can be good for our physical, psychological, and social health,” said Ayoubzadeh. “These activities help keep soft skills at the forefront of employees’ minds and sustain Allina’s culture of excellent customer service.”

Since its inception in 2016, the Our Promise program has become one of the IS and clinical engineering leadership team’s key strategies for enhancing the customer experience. Ayoubzadeh said she hopes the program will eventually permeate into the DNA of the culture as the department strives to deliver on its vision of world-class service with every interaction. In addition, she is hopeful that one day, the program will serve as a template for other healthcare organizations that want to give their nonclinical employees the soft skills they need to provide excellent customer service.
these high-profile positions if you don’t develop your soft skills.”

According to Jacques, examples of soft skills for HTM leadership include:
• Influence
• Adaptability
• Change management
• Courage
• Passion for results
• Emotional intelligence
• Coaching
• Relationship building
• Financial acumen
• Active listening

How do you master the soft skills that will propel you into leadership? One option is the fellowship program with the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE), which both Jacques and Busdicker completed. The program is for health professionals from any department or discipline with a post-baccalaureate degree and at least three years of ACHE membership.

“I got involved with the ACHE program because I wanted a better understanding of healthcare as a whole,” said Busdicker. “The ACHE fellowship program taught me how to look at a hospital from top to bottom and from side to side—to see and understand issues outside the HTM department. This helped me to make a connection between what we do in HTM and how we can help the organization achieve its vision and mission.”

In addition to the ACHE program, Busdicker and Jacques said the Healthcare Information Management Systems Society (HIMSS) and the College of Healthcare Information Management Executives (CHIME) are good sources of soft skills training for HTM leadership. HIMSS is a national organization with local chapters that offer professional development opportunities. CHIME offers the Healthcare CIO Boot Camp and Healthcare CISO Boot Camp. These intensive programs help leaders set institutional visions and strategies, manage customer service relationships, and facilitate organizational change.

Soft Skills and HTM Outreach
In addition to improving an HTM professional’s performance and chances of getting a job in leadership, Deater said that soft skills can help inform outreach efforts to prospective healthcare technology students. In the past year, Deater has enthusiastically participated in several HTM outreach events at high school job fairs and employment expos for the general public.

Regarding the impending dearth of HTM professionals as the older generation prepares for retirement, Deater said: “HTM hasn’t been promoted as much as it should have been. That’s partly why we have a shortage of BMETs right now. We need HTM professionals with the soft skills and the drive to go out and talk about HTM as a great professional option—not only with students but also with other professionals at local hospitals, administrators at Department of Veterans Affairs offices, and guidance counselors at high schools. In turn, you could inspire these people to say to their colleagues, pupils, and children, ‘Hey, a career in HTM might be a perfect fit for you!’”

Related Articles in BI&T

References
Use this guide to achieve a higher level of financial and operational performance for your HTM department.

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