Q&A w/ Brad Wilson (BCBSNC): FutureWork & Health Care

I recently caught up with Brad Wilson, President and CEO of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC), to pick his brain on the future of work in the health care sector. We’re just four weeks out from the 2016 Emerging Issues Forum, FutureWork, and I wanted Brad Wilson, a highly respected sector expert, to share his thoughts about what's ahead for health employment.

At the FutureWork Forum (Feb. 8-9, 2016, Raleigh), North Carolinians will work together to devise great strategies to ensure our state enjoys a future of enough good jobs. Besides health, the Forum will also give the education, banking/finance, energy, and government/smart communities sectors special focus.

FutureWork Forum Feb. 8-9, 2016!
Grab your FutureWork ticket today!
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Featured Data Source: Emerging Issues Commons
Check out the Commons for extensive county-level NC health info, including per capita licensed practical nurses.

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Thank you for your investment in North Carolina's future!
We face an enormous “futurework” challenge as two big trends converge: the “rise of the robots” means that automation will continue to eliminate jobs across the economy, and meanwhile North Carolina will get much older and more diverse.

Here’s my exchange with Brad Wilson:

Q: As you look across the broad health care sector, how are you already seeing the tech automation and demography trends in motion?

A: The two urgent goals in the health care industry in the immediate term are improving health outcomes and controlling costs. We will not reach those goals by simply continuing to do business as we have in the past. The American population is skewing older, and the health care work force is not expanding quickly enough to meet demand. HealthAffairs.org predicts the U.S. nursing shortage will reach 260,000 registered nurses by 2025. Technology can help fill that gap, but health care is and must remain personal. Unlike what we see in Star Wars, computers and robots cannot replace health care practitioners. Remember: Star Wars doesn’t take place in the future – it was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Still, technology can help health care professionals be more strategic and more productive. Care management is an area where technology is helping health professionals monitor patients’ journeys through health episodes so that treatment plans can be tailored for individual needs. Mobile communication tools and wearable health monitors are helping to make health care more consumer-focused, which can bring improved outcomes in a more efficient system. The use of analytics can allow for more personalized medicine that will deliver better value and more cost-effective care.

Q: Within the health insurance sector, how are trends in automation and demography reshaping your workforce development needs and forecasts?

A: Over the next five years, health care will retire a fairly large set of “legacy systems,” a process requiring a tremendous amount of resources. Health care has to find ways to dismantle those systems as quickly as possible, providing financial incentives for accelerating change and realizing cost savings.

We must embrace a culture of innovation, rewarding tech professionals for taking calculated risks and tolerating occasional failures resulting from bold thinking. This is a significant change from the past practice of incentivizing perfection and, in effect, discouraging risk.

Q: What advice do you have for young people today about the skill sets needed to succeed in tomorrow’s healthcare workforce?

A: Perhaps the most important skill for young people looking to enter the health care work force is the ability to innovate in a
rapidly evolving industry – the ability to “build the airplane while flying it.” Future leaders have to be comfortable with some uncertainty in the coming years as health care is redesigned in a more consumer-centric model. They need to embrace the idea of noble failures in the process of building a more affordable and efficient system.

Strategic thinkers will win out over task-oriented managers; bold creativity and rapid prototyping will be rewarded rather than cautious, sure-thing approaches to problem solving. Young people looking for careers in health care need to adopt an experimental/laboratory approach to their work. That is what health care needs in the coming years.

As Brad Wilson emphasizes, to navigate successfully through the automation and demography transition, North Carolina must embrace a culture of innovation—risks and all.

For more on the future of work in the health sector – and the entire North Carolina economy -- grab your Forum ticket and add your voice to this critical discussion. Join sector experts from across the state and the nation as we determine what we should be doing now to refocus our educational and workforce development systems and public policy choices to drive job creation. We’ll seek new models and strategies to position North Carolina as a leader in the global battle for good jobs for tomorrow’s diverse workforce.

The 2016 FutureWork Forum: Amazing speakers. Sector-focused strategic planning. Unparalleled networking with leaders from across the state.

Don’t miss it!

Sincerely,
Sarah Langer Hall