Improving healthcare with an unlikely super power: data

by Natalie Bruckner

Michael Caesar, MBA ’01, and Kevin Feng, MGB ’14, never intended to make a career for themselves in the healthcare data analytics realm. In fact, while studying at Gustavson, they had very different expectations of where they would end up. “A musician, perhaps?” suggests Feng, laughing.

And yet, with data analytics among the fastest growing industries in the tech world right now (estimated to be worth around $1.35 billion in Canada today), and the healthcare industry booming, it was a wise, if unexpected, career path.

Today, Caesar, Executive Director, Data and Implementation Science at the University Health Network (UHN), and Feng, former Functional Manager, Analytics Operations Lead at Cancer Care Ontario, are impacting the future of healthcare by working on enhanced data that will lead to insightful action.

Caesar, a veteran in the field with 18 years’ experience, leads a team of experts in both change management and analytics on a variety of projects to help improve patient outcomes, health system costs and access to care. Feng, who has five years’ experience in the sector (two of which were with Caesar at UHN), was recently working on a project to find long-term solutions to help those with mental health and addiction issues.

The experiences of these two alumni offer a glimpse into what it takes to work—and thrive—in this sector, for everyone from established professionals looking for fresh ideas about continued growth to recent grads curious about transitioning into healthcare administration and analytics.
Michael Caesar

Leading the Charge for Change

Navigating a leadership career from MBA to award-winning healthcare executive

How did you become involved in healthcare data analytics?
I honestly thought I would end up in a completely different industry, but when I came out of the MBA with a specialization in service management, it opened my eyes to a larger potential to get involved. My father was a physician so I was exposed to the healthcare environment from an early age, and that struck a chord in me. Straight out of my MBA, I was recruited as a senior analyst in Toronto before moving into change management at University Health Network (UHN). I would often spend the day with care providers and that hands-on experience helped me understand the complexities involved in the healthcare realm as I transitioned from project manager to executive director.

What is an indicator of an award-winning team?
First, there are a few things that I think are essential in a team. Every team is different, working on different problems and bringing different skills to the table—every single time. There are a few things that I think are important in positioning a team properly. First, it's about goals: clarity in purpose and a direct link between purpose and the team is essential. Helping the team remain focused on those goals, surfacing data that support those goals and helping the organization learn about those goals is essential. Second, it's about setting up an environment for the team to debate, discuss and sometimes, yes, argue. These are all incredibly important traits for a team. If they aren't debating and challenging each other then they aren't learning together and dealing with the complexities involved in the healthcare environment for the team to debate, discuss and sometimes, yes, argue.

What do you do to create such a team?
As a team leader, you need to focus on those goals and supporting the team. A leader who knows there are going to be twists and turns, ups and downs, and create an environment that knows when to protect the team and when to challenge them.

Kevin Feng

Answering Opportunity’s Knock

International business grad takes on healthcare data analytics

How did you become involved in healthcare data analytics?
I've had the incredible opportunity to be involved in the transformation of the hospital from one that was focused on the technology and using it as a tool to drive improvement and innovation— including Canada's prestigious Ingenious Award in 2016.

What exciting projects are you involved in currently?
I am working with four hospitals that provide specialized mental health data on mental health and addiction. It’s a private project that is planned to be scaled out to all mental health units and programs in the province. We are looking at not just patient access in the hospital but also what happens once they are discharged. How do we not lose patients in the gaps of the system? How can we ensure the continuity of care is available in the community? The project is trying to address that gap by using data analytics to positively affect change.

What advice would you give recent grads looking to get a foot in the door?
I feel lucky that I had the experience in ER as I got to see the realities of the frontline and feel I can now bring this into my role. However, having that experience isn't essential. It’s more about being open-minded and recognizing opportunities. I was a business analyst with a business degree and somehow ended up in healthcare data, so don’t rule anything out. I think most people want to try to do something that will make a difference and save a life, and healthcare provides a great chance to do this.