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Get Ready for the Ride of your Career

The recently passed economic stimulus package is relying on healthcare information technology to transform the nation's healthcare system. As an IT professional, you may be looking at the most exciting challenge and greatest opportunity of your career.

The United States has witnessed nearly a century of government initiatives bent on achieving a national healthcare policy. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson and Clinton all supported some kind of healthcare reform. Each time, the moment for change seemed promising but collapsed under the political, social and economic complexities of the day.

Not this time. Today we're wading through the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and our national healthcare system is larger, more complex and under more stress than ever. It is precisely because of all that, that we are taking the first steps toward major change in our healthcare system. The \$787 billion economic stimulus measure - known as the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA) – is about to start pumping billions of dollars into healthcare reform. This unprecedented injection of federal funds provides \$100 billion for healthcare measures including \$19 billion to accelerate the development of a nationwide health information technology network by 2014. These investments are expected to create jobs, stimulate the economy and lay the foundation for transforming the American healthcare system. The surge of federal money guarantees that change is coming, and it is coming fast.

A key component of the healthcare stimulus measure is the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, which designates \$17 billion in incentives for doctors to adopt electronic health records (EHRs). Another \$2 billion is for the Office of the National Coordinator (ONC), which will gather information on best practices for adopting, deploying and using Health IT (HIT). Now that we have a federal requirement to implement interoperable, certified EHRs, the transition to an electronic healthcare system will move forward at a quickened pace over the next several years. As an IT professional you may be looking at the most exciting challenge and greatest opportunity of your career.



The implications for Massachusetts area health institutions are particularly tricky, as this legislation is layered on top of the Massachusetts Electronic Health Records Mandate that was signed into law in August 2008. The Massachusetts health reform bill aims to facilitate the total implementation of EHR in all Massachusetts doctors' offices and hospitals by 2015. It has yet to be determined how the \$15 million that Massachusetts has allocated for EHR will be spent beyond the broad goal of advancing e-health. No doubt the signing of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law left many who work in Massachusetts healthcare IT wondering "where do I go from here?"

So what's your game plan?

If you're wondering how the stimulus plan will affect you and what you can do about it, you're in good company. For the moment we can only speculate about how this influx of funding will affect local institutions and their IT departments. It is too early to predict who the winners and losers will be in terms of IT growth and spending, *but there is plenty you can and should do to prepare for the inevitable changes*. Here are a few places to start:

How far along the EHR curve are you? EHR adoption varies tremendously among physician practices and hospital systems. Your organization may already have a fully functioning EHR system or you may just be starting to explore the capabilities of EHR. Where you are on the EHR implementation curve will determine how you approach the EHR mandate, as will cost, resources and ROI considerations.

Know thyself – Now is an ideal time to take stock of your organization's IT skills and resources and a good time to assess what assets you can tap into when you get that call to expand or jump-start a new IT initiative. Do your homework and put relationships in place now so you can quickly access the talent you may need to fill gaps and meet new demands. A strong relationship with an expert resource is one of the best ways to maintain a direct line to top talent, especially for hard-to-fill positions. Identifying your strengths and weaknesses will enable you to strategize and swiftly move forward when the stimulus spigot opens for Massachusetts area businesses and institutions.

Stay agile – The most agile organizations are already planning how to improve their position in the inevitable recovery. Smart companies will remain flexible, embrace change and explore creative approaches to solving new challenges. Consider how you can be "action-oriented" and ready for what may involve significant change.

Keep your radar up – All eyes in Massachusetts healthcare are watching to see how the federal stimulus will translate to new spending. How will you stay on top of top developments and mandates? We are fortunate to enjoy a culture of collaboration among many local healthcare organizations - all are potential sources for news, information and opinion on the most challenging issues facing healthcare IT. Last week, Gardner Resources' management team attended the [Transforming Healthcare Summit](#) in Boston, where more than 400 stakeholders gathered to discuss and debate the impact of President Obama's economic stimulus plan. The information exchange was fascinating and the conversations will



continue as more details about the stimulus plan are revealed. Other organizations, such as [The Massachusetts Health Data Consortium](#) and the [Massachusetts eHealth Collaborative \(MAeHC\)](#) are watching the federal spending plans closely and are an excellent source of information and ideas – use them!

Economies are cyclical and we will phase out of this downturn. As we prepare for the inevitable upturn, area healthcare IT professionals will be pivotal to the success of our local businesses and institutions as well as to the success of the healthcare reform movement. Gardner Resources is closely following the national economic stimulus plan and examining its local implications. We'll continue to monitor developments so we can help you capitalize on the unprecedented change that is heading your way.