

Unit Six

Career planning and development for health care assistants from a health care assistant's perspective

Key messages

Reading this unit will:

- explain the career pathways for health care assistants (HCAs) and what options there are to develop and progress
- describe the career planning progress
- describe the help and support that is available to HCAs and employers to support career development.

If you are already an HCA, you will be using this toolkit to find out what you can do to enhance or change your career as an HCA working in general practice. If you are not yet an HCA, or are working outside the health service or in an administrative role in the NHS, you might be considering the option of becoming an HCA in general practice. Either way, you should find this Unit useful.

Reasons for developing your career plans

You may want to develop your career plans in order to:

- develop your particular skills and interests within the HCA post in which you are working so that you function more effectively
- develop your career so that you become more specialised in a particular clinical or administrative area
- increase the variety in your work and to develop a new skill that enhances your current post, such as spirometry or audit
- improve your chances of promotion
- achieve a complete change; in a new career that is a natural extension of your current work
- make a fresh start in a different career within or outside the health service
- handle the other pressures in your life; more flexible working hours could perhaps help you to cope with looking after young children or elderly dependents.

You might also want to check out what other opportunities there are for your future career, such as podiatry, nursing or physiotherapy.

Career planning

When career planning; the first step is to learn more about yourself. You should aim to discover:

- your personal strengths
- your career and job preferences
- your motivation and priorities in life
- how you want to balance your time between work and leisure
- how you want to balance time and effort spent on work and income
- what levels of responsibility, challenge and interaction with other people suit your personal style.

Take a look at your skills and strengths, and where you are with your career by performing self-assessment of your strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats relating to your career development (See **Tool - In-depth look at your skills and strengths and where you are with your career**). Alternatively, you could get a wider perspective of your current job satisfaction by undertaking a force-field analysis. See **Tool - Draw up a force-field analysis** to consider the positive and negative factors weighing on you at work.

You could put your career planning in context by thinking about your career to date – how you got to be an HCA – as a starting point for considering where you are going (See **Tool - Undertake a 'life-line review' of your career to date**). If you've got the time and motivation, and others to advise and support you, take your career analysis a step further using a more in-depth assessment tool (see **Tool - Self analysis: your skills and strengths, plans and vision**).

Various triggers might occur in your life that prompt you to ask yourself whether you are happy at work, whether you are in the right job and whether it is worth rethinking your present career. These triggers could include the following:

- *you are faced with a variety of opportunities and options, uncertain of which career path to take*
- *you feel there is a mismatch between you and your particular career – maybe your personal ethics or values are threatened, or your needs and preferences have changed*
- *you feel demotivated or dissatisfied with your work – maybe your role has changed or you feel your career has plateaued for too long*
- *a serious life event occurs – bereavement, getting married, going through a divorce, developing an illness or disability*
- *a significant event occurs at work – a complaint from a patient, the traumatic death of a patient, you making a mistake, a critical incident arises from work, such as you or a colleague being subject to a dispute or personal attack*
- *you are preparing for retirement – you want to slow down, but not stop.*

Tips for managing your career

Consider what you want, or need, from your career and what you can offer in return.

- *Recognise your transferable skills and the competences you have already developed over time.*
- *Develop one or more career goals.*
- *Be flexible about change so that you can take advantage of opportunities as they crop up.*
- *Promote an accurate profile of yourself – maximise your strengths and acknowledge your weaknesses or inexperience (and what you are doing to address these issues).*
- *Understand the value of your contribution to others and their work programmes in various health settings or organisations.*
- *Plan for your future – never stop – even if it is to get ready for a fulfilling retirement.*

Your career planning needs to be done in the context of the likely changes to the way that general practice or the health service in general is organised and changing through developments such as more patient choice and practice-based commissioning. For instance, the current emphasis on flexible working means that you can combine more than one post, maybe through working in more than one general practice or having dual clinical- and administrative-type components to your post. Secondment opportunities are more commonplace and varied.

You need to think ahead about your career development, and work to gain qualifications and experience that will help you in the future post you envisage. Prepare yourself for change – you may find that the GROW (Goals, Reality, Options and Way forward) model will help you to commit to the career change ahead (see [Tool - Appraise your own strengths and weaknesses, aptitudes and values as a person and as an HCA](#)).

If you do not gain new skills or qualifications, your career plan is likely to remain just that – a plan! Your career should be a positive driving force in your life, rather than the negative or nuisance part that gets in the way of the rest of your life.

Lifelong learning

You need to learn new skills, take on new knowledge, and develop new behaviours and attitudes throughout your life to keep pace with your life's changes. It is important to gain those basic qualifications and progress as you continue to learn more and more. Learning should help you to relish change as it means that you will learn something new and develop further as a result.

Career development should be an integral part of your personal development plan (see [Tool - Drafting your personal development plan](#)) which should set out goals for the forthcoming year and beyond, and describe realistic ways of achieving your career goals.

You cannot consider your career progression to become an HCA or to enhance your skills as an HCA in isolation from the rest of your practice team. There needs to be an opening for such a post that will apply the new skills you hope to develop – in your practice or in the PCT, for instance.

The NHS learning and development service offers impartial advice to current NHS staff on ways to learn, develop or get the qualifications they need to make the most of their potential. You can use the service to:

- *explore your learning and development needs*
- *receive general careers advice*
- *talk through a range of learning and career options*
- *get help to make realistic, informed decisions about your learning and development*
- *find out where to go for funding and learning support.*²

Motivation

People are motivated by different things. Money, fame and power are all key motivators. Some of the best motivators for fulfilling your needs are:

- *interesting and/or useful work*
- *sense of achievement*
- *responsibility*
- *opportunities for career progression or professional development*
- *gaining new skills or competences*
- *sense of belonging to a practice team or the NHS.*

Find out what motivates and inspires you, and what does not. Your life experiences, your principles and values, your relationships with family, friends and colleagues, and work identity influence your career choices. The greater your self-awareness the more satisfying your career choices could be.

Work values are personal to you. You will be happiest and most fulfilled in a job as an HCA that incorporates your main work values. You can classify what motivates you into eight categories:

- *technical or functional competence*
- *general managerial competence*
- *autonomy or independence*
- *security or stability*
- *entrepreneurial creativity*
- *service or dedication to a cause*
- *pure challenge*
- *lifestyle.*³

You can define your self-image in terms of these traits and come to understand more about your talents, motives and values – and which of these you would not give up if forced to make a choice (see [Tool - Appraise your own strengths and weaknesses, aptitudes and values as a person and as an HCA](#)).

Transferable skills and competencies

Change is a common facet of life in the NHS, so be prepared to be flexible and move with the times. Recognise your strengths, personal attributes and experiences (whatever the source – maybe from outside the NHS) and transfer those into your everyday work, applying them to the next task or challenge that presents itself.

Making the most of your annual appraisal or performance review

Look at [Unit 4: Appraisal and personal development reports](#) to learn more about how to make the most of your appraisal or performance review. Use the opportunity to get your line manager's help to take forward your career as an HCA or to branch out to another healthcare career. Take your career development action plan, based on the GROW exercise, with you (see [Tool - The GROW model](#)) – then you will demonstrate that you have thought your proposed career changes through. Start formulating your career goals too (see [Tool - Developing one or more career goals - as an HCA](#)).

Seek a career mentor^{4,5}

A career mentor relationship (as opposed to a practice mentor with some responsibility for supervising, assessing, teaching you) is more of a one-way relationship where the mentor has the time and capacity to listen to you, and to help you in making decisions about your career. The interpretation of the term 'mentor' can differ between nursing, and the other NHS professions and staff groups. HCA practice mentors, who are usually nurses in the same practice, can take on a supervisory role, as in Stockport PCT's programme, see example below.

Example: Practice nurse mentor

In Stockport PCT, all HCAs have a named practice nurse mentor when they are appointed.⁶ The PCT training and support package has a 'novice-to-expert' approach to build the competency of HCAs. The nurse mentor has an additional role to those expected of the career mentor. They are responsible for working with trainee HCAs to ensure that they are a safe and competent practitioner on the completion of their training. The quarterly HCA forum provides additional support.

Some career mentors are only concerned with helping you to identify and meet your educational or training needs through a development plan, whereas others give practical or emotional support too. Linda, in the example below, has a career mentor who helped her to diversify into the HCA role. Look at the section on finding a career mentor in *Unit 5: Education and training* and the various definitions that can be found within this unit.

Example: Career mentors

Linda worked for the Willow Tree practice as a member of the reception team when the PCT established the practice in an inner-city area of her town. She was already participating in a local career development initiative for administrative staff and HCAs, whereby she had been allocated a career mentor. She discussed her aspirations for moving into a caring role with her mentor, as she felt really drawn to working more closely with patients than her reception and clerical role allowed, but wasn't sure if she was good enough. They discussed Linda's career plans and how a move to an HCA post might slot into the greater scheme of things. Linda applied for the next part-time HCA post in the practice and got the job against stiff competition from other applicants (her mentor had encouraged her to go for interview skills training). Her practice manager was pleased to allow Linda to combine her new HCA role with half-time clerical work and replaced the 'other half' of Linda with a new receptionist. The practice arranged her induction to her HCA role to take account of the fact that she knew the practice team well, but was inexperienced at care work. She continued to meet with her career mentor for a further 6 months.

You could just approach someone in the practice or PCT to see if they will mentor you – but you may well get a rebuff if they are busy. It is better to discuss your need for a mentor at your appraisal or an interim review, and ask your appraiser to try and identify someone suitable who is prepared to take you on. Your career mentor will probably be more experienced than you are, and should have the knowledge and skills to be able to challenge you and prompt your career development. They might be a practice nurse, a senior HCA, a primary care manager or an allied health professional like a physiotherapist – it will depend on who is available and willing, and what sort of career direction or development that you are wanting their help with. Ask if the mentoring discussion can be in work time – maybe an hour every month or two. It might be possible to include the career mentoring within any annual allowance for study leave. However, if the career mentoring has to happen outside working hours, you'll find it is worth it – try it and see.

Take your completed self-assessment of your skills, strengths and where you are in your career to discuss with your mentor. You may find it helpful to use:

Tool - In-depth look at your skills and strengths, and where you are with your career

Tool - Draw up a force-field analysis

Tool - Undertake a 'life-line review' of your career to date

Tool - Self analysis: your skills and strengths, plans and vision

Tool - Appraise your own strength and weakness, aptitudes and values as a person and as an HCA

Tool - The GROW model

Tool - Develop one or more career goals - as an HCA

Get their perspective on how you have rated yourself and your career plans. Think more widely about how career development features in your learning and development activities, and share your current personal development plan with your mentor too (see [Tool - Drafting your personal development plan](#)).

Progressing along your career path

Have a look at the NHS Career Framework, which has the nine key elements listed in the table below. This will help you envisage how your HCA post fits in with the hierarchy of the map of all NHS careers.

Table Key elements of the NHS Career Framework⁷

Level 9. More senior staff: with ultimate responsibility for clinical caseload decision making and full on-call accountability.

Level 8. Consultant practitioners: staff working at a very high level of clinical expertise and/or have responsibility for planning of services.

Level 7. Advanced practitioners: experienced clinical professionals with skills and knowledge to a very high standard.

Level 6. Senior practitioners/specialist practitioners: staff with a higher degree of autonomy and responsibility than 'practitioners'.

Level 5. Practitioners: most frequently registered practitioners in their first and second post-registration/professional qualification jobs.

Level 4. Assistant practitioners/associate practitioners: delivering protocol-based clinical care under the direction and supervision of a state registered practitioner. Probably studying for, or attained, a foundation degree, HCAs (BTEC) higher or Higher National Diploma (HND).

Level 3. Senior HCAs/technicians: have a higher level of responsibility than a support worker. Probably studying for, or attained, NVQ Level 3 or Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

Level 2. Support workers: frequently have job title HCA or healthcare technician. Probably studying for, or attained, NVQ Level 2.

Level 1. Initial entry-level jobs: such as domestic assistants or cadets requiring very little formal education or previous knowledge, skills or experience in delivering or supporting the delivery of healthcare.

You can look on the *Skills for Health* website (www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/careerframework/tools.php) to review the career pathways that are available to all NHS staff – in your case HCAs. You could use this career tool to see what career options are available to you relating to your personal and practice commitments. A senior HCA, for instance, has several career options at Level 4 if they continue to develop their competence: an assistant practitioner in radiography or nursing, or a community care assistant (see [Tool - Information about training courses](#)). Tameside and Glossop PCT have introduced trainee assistant practitioners who provide invaluable assistance to other healthcare professionals while receiving training on the job.⁸

Assistant/Associate Practitioner

The role of Assistant/Associate Practitioner role sits at level 4 of the career framework between an HCA who may or may not hold an NVQ and a qualified registered nurse. Assistant practitioners are also involved in delivering protocol-based clinical care that has previously been in the remit of registered health professionals. However, they are expected to take on a higher level of responsibility and run independent clinics under the direction and supervision of a state registered practitioner such as a nurse or physiotherapist. For example, this role is well established in radiography and has helped to develop a career structure for people who either want to advance, but do not wish to become registered health professionals, or for those who wish to gain professional qualifications. It gives the employer the opportunity to look at skill gaps within the team and decide at what level these should be filled.

An integral part of the development of this role is the work based training. This is completed through a Foundation Degree, at Level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework,¹² a flexible, work based, training and development programme that is underpinned by the principles of learning at work, in work and through work. The Foundation Degree is a higher education qualification worth 240 credits (similar to a Diploma in Higher Education) and usually takes between 2 – 3 years to complete. It is designed to:

- *broaden the skill base of existing health care workers and prepare them to take on additional responsibilities*
- *attract new workers into the health service*
- *recognise previous qualifications and/or experience.*

The Foundation Degree is validated by a University and delivered in partnership with Further Education Colleges. It gives learners a combination of technical, vocational, academic and transferable skills and is an important step on the skills escalator between NVQ level 3 and full professional training. Graduates of a Foundation Degree can expect undergraduate professional training to be reduced by one year. (see [Unit 5: Education and training of health care assistants](#)).

Others (such as Pat in the example below) progress to Level 5 after they have gained a registered qualification at university as a nurse or allied health professional. In the example below, Pat's experience demonstrates the route that an HCA can take to progress in their career, from receptionist to HCA to registered nurse. Her general practice employers supported her throughout in undertaking basic training and then an NVQ in Care. Even when she became a full-time student nurse, the practice kept in touch and provided support. If Pat chooses nursing in a primary-care setting for the next stage of her career, they hope that there will be a vacancy for her as a practice nurse in the future.

Example: Case studies of progression of receptionist to HCA to registered nurse

At the Ridge Medical Practice:

Pat had been a receptionist in the practice for a number of years when she expressed an interest in becoming an HCA. She applied for a vacant post on the nursing team. She was duly appointed and commenced her induction period. Following this, Pat undertook phlebotomy training at the local hospital and began to settle into her new role. She then commenced a university-accredited primary care HCA course (see www.primarycaretraining.com for example), which she completed 6 months later. A further period of consolidation followed in which Pat undertook ECG and spirometry training, and her role expanded to include other duties such as assisting in minor surgery, new patient interviews, and working alongside the practice nurses in the cardiovascular and diabetes chronic disease management clinics.

Pat had successfully completed her NVQ Level 3 in Care 12 months later and it was tremendously rewarding to see how she was developing in her role. The nurse team leader felt that she had additional potential and encouraged her to consider nurse training. She applied for a place at the local University School of Nursing and is now a full-time, first-year student nurse. The practice will continue to support Pat during her study. They have set up an agreement that will enable Pat to keep in contact and access any practice information that may help in her studies – ie audit facilities and the practice library.⁹

The Hanham Surgery

'Both our existing HCAs were initially employed as receptionists. They have gradually developed their role from part-time phlebotomists/receptionists to their current roles as full-time integrated members of the nursing team. They have a wide range of competencies and have been key to enabling the practice to meet access targets by shifting work to the most appropriate practitioner and freeing up nurse time to manage the chronic disease element of patient care. In their own right, they have worked holistically with the rest of the team to ensure that all appropriate blood tests are carried out and blood pressure readings are up to date, flagging up concerns regarding the patients that they see. They have provided all the physical health checks for patients on the severe mental health register and next year we will be extending the service to patients with learning difficulties.'¹⁰

If you do not have the necessary qualifications to get onto higher education courses, see

[Tool - Information about training courses](#)

for more information about access courses or see

[Tool - Careers support information for HCAs](#)

for others who can give you advice about careers. If you have

been out of work and are considering returning, see [Tool - Information about training courses](#), which describes how to find out more about return-to-work courses. This tool also covers the type of NVQs that suit your HCA role and relevant Open University courses.

The example overleaf describes the entry requirements set at one university for those working in the care sector who wish to take the next career step and embark on formal training to gain professional registration as a qualified nurse.

Example: Entry requirements at Keele University for nurse training¹¹

The advert in the local paper appeals for people currently working in the care sector to apply for nurse training. They must meet one of the academic requirements listed (in addition to having care experience/life skills):

- 5 GCSEs at grade C, including maths, English and a science
- BTEC National Diploma (health related) + 3 GCSEs at grade C
- access to higher education
- Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education health and social care + 3 GCSEs at grade C
- City and Guilds Diploma (welfare studies)
- CACHE Diploma in Child Care and Education + 3 GCSEs at grade C.

There are no university tuition fees for Diploma-level training. Successful Diploma candidates are awarded a non-means tested bursary. The course is full-time with a 45-week academic year for 3 years.

If you are unsure about the career route you want to pursue, then have a look at the website www.nhscareers.nhs.uk. It gives easy access to career guidance for all types of NHS careers. You can then consult the experts in careers at your PCT to find out about the various options that are available and any funding that is available. You'll also find out more by hunting around for appropriate courses at your local universities and colleges and checking out their entry requirements, as in the example above.

Applying for a new post

If you are interested in applying for the more senior post of HCA or another job that you see advertised,

Tool - How to complete an application form

will give you help with completing the application form.

Look at *Tool - Hints and tips on compiling your CV*

for guidance on compiling your CV to accompany your application. If you are shortlisted, *Tool - Tips and hints for interview*

relays tips and hints to help you prepare for the interview.

Finally: seven steps to getting on – your checklist¹

All these tools and approaches may be confusing – you may be thinking you can have too much of a good thing. Here's a checklist of seven steps that will really crystallise the actions you can take to aid with your career planning and development.

Step 1 – Know yourself

- Review and update your CV – It is a snapshot of your career.
- Reflect on what makes you tick, your leadership and decision-making styles, and the extent to which you are a team player.
- Be clear about what is important to you in your career.

Step 2 – Know what you want

- Know how much of a challenge you want.
- Know how much you want to follow other people's guidance or lead.
- Know how much money you want or need.
- Know what kind of work/life balance suits you.

Step 3 – Know where you are

- *Have a good understanding of your achievements and skills.*
- *Know your strengths and weaknesses.*
- *Understand your career anchors.*

Step 4 – Know where you want to go

- *Check out the options and opportunities open to you.*
- *Compare what is on offer with your responses to steps 1 and 2 above.*

Step 5 – Know the gap

- *Analyse the gap between where you are now and the variety of options for where you want to be.*

Step 6 – Know how to get there

- *Have a range of strategies to bridge that gap in your career plan.*
- *Develop a realistic action plan with contingencies for if, or when, your ideal career path does not work out.*

Step 7 – Get support

- *Find a mentor.*
- *Develop a network outside your immediate colleagues of others who are, or could, be important to you or informative about your future career.*

Summary

- *Career planning gives you an opportunity to think about what you want to achieve from your job and how you can go about it.*
- *Becoming an HCA can get you started on the path to other careers in healthcare, eg nursing.*
- *There is support available from you PCT and others to help you identify the right career development opportunity.*
- *You need to prepare to take advantage of career development opportunities – this unit tells you how to begin.*

References

1. Chambers R (ed). *Career Planning for Everyone in the NHS. The Toolkit*. Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing; 2005.
2. NHS learning and development service 08000 150 850 open from 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday (calls are free and confidential).
3. Schein E. *Career Anchors, Discovering your Real Values*. Oxford: Pfeiffer; 1996.
4. Chambers R, Mohanna K, Wakley G, Wall D. *Demonstrating your Competence 1. Healthcare Teaching*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press; 2004.
5. Bayley H, Chambers R, Donovan C. *The Good Mentoring Toolkit for Healthcare*. Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing; 2004.
6. Stockport PCT. *Personal communication*. Stockport: Stockport PCT; 2005.
7. Skills for Health. *Key Elements of the Career Framework 2005*. http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/careerframework/key_elements.php
8. NHS Alliance. *Fast Forward. So you Thought you Knew all About NHS Primary Care*. Retford: NHS Alliance; 2005.
9. Bates M. *Personal communication*. Bradford: The Ridge Medical Practice; 2005.
10. Ricketts J, McCarthy C. *Personal communication*. Bristol: Hanham Surgery; 2005.
11. Keele University. *School of Nursing and Midwifery*. Keele University website: <http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/ns/index.htm>
12. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). *National Qualifications Framework*. QCA website: <http://www.qca.org.uk/493.html>