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SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN CANADA

FOCUS ON KEY INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

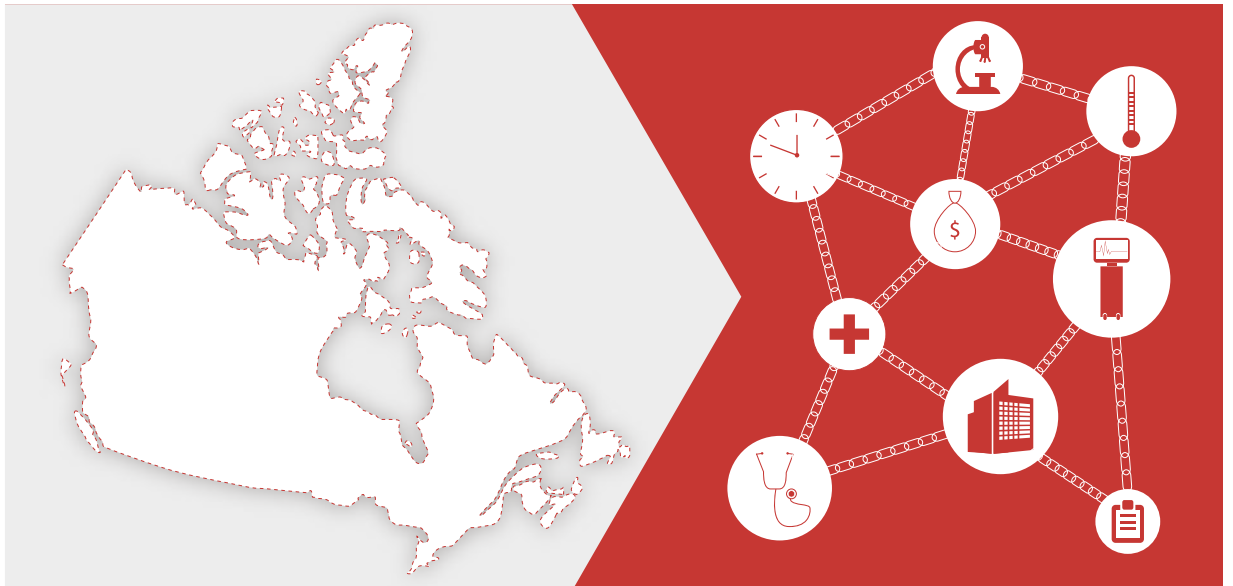


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Overview

Managing a supply chain efficiently and effectively is tremendously challenging in any industry. Time and financial constraints combined with operational dependency on inputs to produce outputs required by buyers is extremely difficult. A publicly-funded supply chain, as in Canada's healthcare industry, makes it even harder to achieve the desired outcomes.

Of course the health and wellbeing of millions of Canadians depend on the country's healthcare supply chain. However, the resources available are being further restricted while at the same time the number of patients and patient care needs are increasing dramatically. The demographics of an ageing population, the use of modern technology, the customisation of healthcare and the spread-out population of Canadians puts the healthcare supply chain under tremendous pressure.

This convergence of issues highlights the need to make the interpersonal skills of healthcare supply chain professionals of paramount importance. There are many technical problems that must be solved and/or resolved through the sharing of leading practices, the networking of industry professionals, and the training of front-line practitioners.

Some of the key current challenges in Canada's healthcare include:

- an ageing population increasing the demand of services but also meaning retirement of experienced healthcare employees

- financial pressure due to the need to rein in healthcare spending
- changes to the budgeting system of healthcare in Canada
- technological innovation in care and recovery

Healthcare supply chain management practitioners in Canada have to work and succeed within this environment. The need to communicate effectively (precisely and in a timely manner), negotiate creative solutions, resolve conflict and take initiative are all becoming more and more important. The 'old' way of doing things has to change to keep up with the dynamic landscape in Canada's healthcare industry.

Context

Typically, the supply chain management industry is characterised by the movement of goods from raw materials to manufactured items to end users. The stakes are raised when the end users are patients with compromised health and the goods are not just commodities but medical devices, tests and diagnostic imaging. The additional risk of an inefficient supply chain necessitates clear, concise and frequent communication in the healthcare industry.

Working in Canada's healthcare supply chain management industry, one has first-hand observation of the dedication and resourcefulness of people in this field. Although some of them 'fell into the supply chain', meaning that their decision was not intentional, once they were in Canada's healthcare

supply chain, they invested their time and energy into it. In an industry with a near zero margin of error allowable, there can be seen an abundance of collaboration, teamwork and support among supply chain partners.

The question has been raised as to why there exists such cooperation between publicly-funded and for-profit organisations. It has been suggested that due to a common experience of enduring hardships, Canada's healthcare supply chain organisations have had to develop close relationships to be able to be successful. With a more limited number of suppliers than in countries like the United States, with far fewer people than in most countries and with a rugged landscape and weather trends, Canada is not an easy place to manage a supply chain. Layered on top of these challenges is the fact that the funding is not tied to the market but rather to a fixed budget.

Communication, Negotiation and Leadership

Key skills that have risen to the top are communication, negotiation and leadership. Without these interpersonal competencies, not only will the jobs of professionals not get done, the needs of the patients will not be met. There are numerous reasons why a 'rush order' has to be made or hospitals cannot pay their suppliers as quickly as expected, but through personal relationships, Canada's healthcare supply chain continues to provide the goods and services to patients.

Communication is critically important in any service role and becomes even more critical when it involves the healthcare of patients. This is most evident in the interaction between clinician and patient. The supply chain must be precise in what both clinicians and patients need in order to provide the quality healthcare that is expected and safe.

Negotiation is the frequent navigation between competing interests, timelines and priorities. Again in healthcare, this decision-making and conflict resolution requires careful consideration of the various perspectives and of what will satisfy as many of the stakeholders as possible.

Leadership can be defined in many ways but 'leading by example' in serving others seems to be most appropriate in regards to patient care. In a service industry such as healthcare, everyone helping out is the only way to make the system cost-effective, timely and of the highest quality possible.

Professional Development in Canada's Supply Chain

There are a number of industry associations providing professional development opportunities. The Supply Chain Management Association (SCMA) is a leading professional association in Canada that provides workshops in key interpersonal skills. In fact, communication, negotiation, and leadership are part of six workshops and eight modules (courses) that make up the core of one of the designation programmes in Canada's supply chain industry.

While this training is not unique to healthcare, many healthcare professionals have completed it or are in the process of completing it. Furthermore, the SCMA has worked with a healthcare supply chain management association, the

Healthcare Supply Chain Network (HSCN), to provide training to supply chain professionals in that industry. In other words, there is a recognition that skills need to be taught from the broader supply chain context but with industry specific issues. Interpersonal skills are important across all industries but there are nuances within each industry that warrant additional focus.

The approved budget for training in Canada's healthcare organisations is limited, especially over the last number of years due to a need to curtail spending. However, individuals are still receiving training in critical skills through a variety of service providers. This trend is likely to continue as professionals recognise the need for continuous improvement in their own abilities, and if they have teams working for them, they recognise this need in the team members also. The technical skills of succeeding in Canada's healthcare supply chain management profession are significant. However it is the interpersonal skills that ultimately permit the flow of goods and services to the clinicians and the patients at the right time at the right cost and in the right way. ■



Key Points

- ✓ Canada's healthcare supply chain management industry is extremely challenging
- ✓ The changing dynamics, including demographics, innovation, and fiscal constraints are placing more demands on Canada's healthcare supply chain management professionals
- ✓ Interpersonal skills help these professionals meet service expectations

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Steven is a Professor, Coach and Consultant. Steven also coaches immigrants through the ACCES Employment in the Greater Toronto area and is an Instructor and volunteer for Supply Chain Management Association Ontario (SCMAO). He owns his own business called AIM Performance Consulting that assists individuals and organisations in meeting their potential.

Steven has worked in supply chain management since being a stock boy in a local grocery store and has held a variety of roles such as Account Manager, Business Solutions Advisor, Marketing Representative, Sales Account Manager and Sourcing Specialist.

Additionally, Steven has been on the Board of Directors and the Professional Development Committee for the Healthcare Supply Chain Network (HSCN). Furthermore, he has been a Board member and a member of the Recruitment and Retention Committee for the Canadian Supply Chain Sector Council (CSCSC).