

A Vice President/Chief Financial Officer



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What is a typical day like?

I arrive at work between 8:30 and 9:00 am and then I review my calendar for any meetings for the day. I also review e-mails and voice messages and respond if necessary. I then work on items on my prioritized "To Do" list between meetings. My day usually ends between 6:00 and 7:00 pm.

What kinds of decisions do you make?

I approve any purchasing decisions for items in excess of \$100 for non routine supplies and services. I perform a benefit/cost analysis for any new lines of services that are explored and make decisions based upon its profitability and service to the community. All contracts are reviewed and approved or denied by me. I also handle decisions on IT purchases and implementation. Fee schedules and all pricing for services are set by the Business Office Director and me. Financial policies and procedures are either written or approved by me. I also take administrative call every three weeks and have to make operational and clinical decisions. For any clinical decisions I refer to either the physician or the director of nursing to make informed decisions.

What are the duties/responsibilities of your job?

I manage the hospital's financial affairs, particularly directing and supervising the functions and activities of the business office, accounting/payroll offices, purchasing, medical records, and information systems. Also I supervise the utilization review in conjunction with the chief nursing officer.

How has your job affected your lifestyle?

My job has had both good and bad effects on my lifestyle. On the good side; I make a good wage and can afford to give my family a pretty good lifestyle without worrying a lot about money and I can save for retirement and have an excellent benefit package. On the bad side; I work 50-60 hours per week and often return to work after my baby is in bed. Do to these hours, I don't get to

spend as much time with my family as I would like. I often lose sleep when the hospital's cash flow is especially tight, and I worry about meeting payroll or the hard decisions that need to be made that will have a big impact on the hospital.

What part of this job do you find most satisfying?

The most satisfying part of my job is feeling as though I have made a difference at the hospital and with the community. The community desperately needs the hospital. Without a hospital in the county, economic development and growth will not happen. The nearest hospital is 45 minutes away. This is time that can make a difference between life and death. The hospital is located right off the Ripley exit and therefore sees a lot of trauma patients in its ER.

When I started this position in June 2002, the hospital had just undergone a federal investigation with the Office of Inspector General and was placed under a corporate integrity agreement. It had lost most of its key admitting physicians and the community was forced to go elsewhere for their healthcare. All of these factors resulted in the hospital suffering a \$2.5 million loss in FY 2002.

Since I had grown up in Ripley, I had a vested interest in wanting the hospital to survive and succeed. Sandra Elza, the CEO had been hired in April of 2002 and was asked by the Board of Directors to get the hospital ready for sale. Of course a lot of work had to be completed. Two different for-profit hospitals expressed interest in purchasing the facility but ultimately declined due, in large part, to the union contracts with the Steelworkers Union and Laborers Union under which the hospital operates. These contracts hindered the for-profit hospitals from being able to make the "slash and burn" changes that would be necessary to make the hospital profitable enough to satisfy their shareholders. Sandra saw the potential of the hospital and asked the board of directors to allow her the opportunity to turn the hospital around. The board agreed.

Since that point, the administration has worked towards making the hospital profitable. It normally takes at least three years to accomplish this. In FY 2003, the hospital experienced losses of \$800,000, a \$1.7 million improvement over the previous year and in FY 2004, the hospital profited \$750,000. This was accomplished by analyzing every line of service provided by the hospital, determining the profit or loss from each service, and investing in those services that are profitable. We also got aggressive in recruiting physicians and are now a fully staffed facility.

What are the problems you see in this field?

As with anything else, I am often competing with things that are out of my control. There are constant deadlines in the midst of trying to make sure that the financial needs of the hospital, its patients, and the employees are being met. Seventy-three percent of the patients and employees are Medicare, Medicaid, or PEIA patients. Changes in these reimbursement programs are constantly putting the hospital at risk financially. The hospital is currently living day-to-day on cash flow with little reserves to provide any kind of safety net. Although the monthly cash flow has doubled during the time I have been in this position, payroll expenses and other related expenses needed to generate the cash flow have risen as well. The hospital is able to cover its current expenses, but is struggling under a lot of old debt.

Would you choose the same path for yourself? Why or why not?

I would choose the same path. Although it is full of challenges, I am in a position where I see the effects of my work, good or bad. I feel I have made a difference to the hospital and that makes it worth working long hours. I spent a few years in public accounting performing tax and consulting work and felt that all I accomplished was meeting one deadline after another and working an excessive amount of hours.

What would you change? Most challenging?

The stress level of the job. There are times that I really don't like knowing that so many people are dependent on the hospital's survival and that is squarely on my shoulders, and the shoulders of the CEO, to make sure that it does.

How well did your college experience prepare you for your job?

The biggest benefit of my college experience on my career is that I learned to be resourceful, methodical, and was able to hone my analytical skills. Since Accounting is a science, my education provided me with a set of standards and an outline of the basics of how any accounting job should be performed. Beyond that, I have learned most of what I know on the job. The education is extremely important however, because it opens doors that would otherwise be closed.

What advice would you give someone pursuing a career with an accounting degree?

I would encourage anyone pursuing an accounting degree to take advantage of the co-op program offered at the college. This not only earns college credit, but it provides strong reinforcement for what you are learning in the classroom. My years of working co-op put me ahead of other graduates and I was hired in a permanent staff accounting position 6 months prior to graduation. I continued to work for that organization for nearly 10 years and I worked up to the position of controller. While working at this job, the employer paid for the last semester of my undergraduate and my entire graduate school expenses. I would also encourage anyone to try to find a mentor to work with early on in their career. I was very fortunate in that I have always had someone in every job who wanted to help me learn and succeed in my career. Since these people were there for me, I was always willing to work whatever hours were needed to take advantage of learning from them. If you do this when you are in your twenties and early thirties, it will launch you forward in your career and make it easier later. In other words, pay your dues early and reap the rewards later.

Interviewed by Holly Sanders for a College 101 assignment on 5/05.