



Alumni Spotlight

Andrew Clifton, Medicare Executive Director of Connecticut, Maine and North Carolina at WellCare Health Plans, takes the deliberate approach to career building

Forgoing short-term gains to achieve long-term goals



In less than 10 years, Andrew Clifton went from college graduate to Medicare Executive Director of Connecticut, Maine and North Carolina at WellCare Health Plans.

That's an impressive achievement in a brief window. And yet, the KPMG alumnus didn't seek success in a hurry but rather took measured steps, investing significant time to learn about his chosen industry

and absorb valuable business skills.

Andrew's decision to take it slow ultimately resulted in a career that took off fast.

"I tried to play the long game," he says. "And thankfully, it really paid off well."

A family of physicians

Andrew graduated from St. Louis University with a degree in business and economics in 2008, just as the recession took hold and employment opportunity withered. He taught classes for free at his former high school and begged the commercial real estate firm where he had interned to give him a job—at any salary. He started as a leasing representative and quickly climbed ranks within the firm. But as Andrew's success in real estate grew, his enthusiasm for the industry did not. "The job bored me to tears."

The passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010 lit a fire in Andrew, whose interest in healthcare comes naturally. Medicine is a family profession for the Cliftons, including Andrew's wife Katherine and his father, both doctors. Andrew started to plan his departure from real estate toward a greater passion.

By networking with professionals across the healthcare spectrum, he determined that insurance was where he could make the greatest impact. "All of the big shifts were coming from the insurance industry itself, top-down, from where the payment is originating," he says. "I was really excited because

I knew there was going to be so much change in the industry. And I wanted to run to that change."

Andrew chose learning and experience over financial security, leaving what had become a good-paying commercial real estate gig for a day job at Cigna Health-Spring in Houston and nights in an MBA program in healthcare administration and management at Rice University. "I took two years to learn as much as I could about healthcare, re-credential myself and pivot my career," he says.

Entering the healthcare field was one of the two smartest career choices Andrew says he made; the other was becoming a consultant.

The appeal of KPMG's practical approach

As he wrapped up his studies at Rice, Andrew interviewed with a number of firms, but the already-experienced recruit found his conversations with KPMG decidedly different.

"I remember it vividly. When I was talking to most other companies, they were very academic conversations, very theoretical," he says. "KPMG was the first group that I felt really understood what I was talking about. The different kinds of problems they were solving, they were very tangible, and not just academic thinking. That made me say, this is the group I want to work with."

Andrew wasn't disappointed. His first assignment when he joined in 2013 was a strategy and cost containment project at a health insurance company where he could immediately put his MBA and job skills to use. "It lined up well, right off the bat," he says. He continued in the health insurance practice, taking on more responsibility and eventually working his way up to director.

While absorbing as much as possible about the healthcare industry at KPMG, Andrew says he learned equally important skills that only consultant work can bring, and he continues to steer young people toward the field.

“When you're a consultant, you're selling projects, you're selling your deliverable—you're selling yourself. That's a really great skill to have when you're working in big companies.”

"For an accelerated way to learn really fast, nothing will beat that experience," he says. "You're being paid to be there, and that clock is always ticking. That mindset can drive people to sink or swim very quickly. I really valued that. It just felt almost impossible to be a complacent consultant, and I can't say that about a lot of jobs."

While Andrew did not continue in a consultant's role, he recognizes the important influence KPMG had on his development.

"I would consider my time at KPMG invaluable during those formative years in my career—from a mentorship perspective, and people taking an interest in my career and personal wellbeing," he says. "I was so torn about leaving the people there. But they were so great about me leaving, they were supportive and honestly wanted to see me and my career develop in the best way for me. And I think that's rare for any workplace, to have that kind of environment."

Diving headlong into healthcare

While at KPMG, Andrew built strong relationships with WellCare's management and produced a significant amount of strategic work for the company, which administers government-sponsored healthcare plans. His efforts caught the eye of the leadership team, including the CEO who called with an offer to join. "I wasn't sure I was going to take the job; he sold me on it," he says. He adds that he thought to himself at the time, "I don't know when I'll have the CEO of a Fortune 200 company call me again to recruit me, so I jumped on board."

WellCare offered the culture Andrew desired in the industry he sought, and it was the right move at the right moment. "I had started thinking about what I wanted to do in my career. I wasn't sure that the partner track, long term, was a great fit for me. So timing wise, it worked out well."

Andrew joined the Tampa-based company in October 2015 in a corporate strategy role and started immediately working on a significant initiative involving the design and rollout of the field care management process. Within approximately a year he applied for and was named COO of Texas/Louisiana in January 2017. The location of the new job in Houston allowed him to return to his home city where he already knew the healthcare market and where his wife happened to match with a fellowship at renowned MD Anderson Cancer Center.

As COO, Andrew directed and managed the Texas/Louisiana market's sales force, provider-relations team, network-

contracting arm, quality department and case managers across seven offices. It was a role for which KPMG prepared him well, he says.

"When you're a consultant, you're selling projects, you're selling your deliverable—you're selling yourself. That's a really great skill to have when you're working in big companies. Good managers are always trying to sell their staff and their team on a vision. I think that's helped me with my team to quickly work with them to develop a shared vision and direction for the organization."

Andrew's work also requires him to keep a pulse on both regional and national healthcare issues so that WellCare's business remains solid while continuing to serve constituents in an environment marked by constant change and uncertainty.

"There is no question that at a macro and industry level, there's going to continue to be a lot of volatility," he says. "The greatest challenge is going to be continuing to move the ball forward to improve the quality and efficiency of the care we're giving people. The biggest hope that I have in the next 4-5 years is that we as an industry can continue to move forward regardless of the political or regulatory climate."

Patience and planning

Having recently been named Medicare Executive Director of Connecticut, Maine and North Carolina at WellCare Health Plans, Andrew has now made a name for himself in the industry he ultimately set out to join, and he views every experience he had as an opportunity to learn, even if it seemed insignificant in the moment. "I look back at commercial real estate and could say, 'what a waste of time,' but it made me much better at relationship building and selling," he says. "The main thing is to be digesting and learning from everything you're doing. If you're not doing that, then you're not doing something right."

Andrew's success to date also hinges on his ability to balance gut decision-making with careful preparation. After all, planning ahead set Andrew's career in the right direction, allowing him to move quickly when opportunity arose.

"Patience is key. You should never become complacent, but I often think ambitious people want things a year or two before they may actually merit what they're after," he says. "What are you doing to position yourself to get where you're going, vs. what is the paycheck, what is my title, what does my office look like now? You should always be thinking a few positions ahead, and how you're going to get there."

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