

Real-life story - Dan Ainsworth

Dan started his career in the legal profession but decided he wanted a more people-focused role. He's worked his way up from a health adviser role to where he is now in a strategic one.

Dan Ainsworth

Strategic head of emergency operations centres

Employer or university

North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust

Salary range

Over £65K

Dan Ainsworth

The NHS provides a true opportunity to start a career that can take you anywhere.

How I got into the role

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I trained to be a solicitor after my law degree but discovered quickly that I wanted to do a more people-based role. I moved to work for Pfizer Pharmaceuticals and then to a publishing company, but found I didn't want to work in an exclusively sales environment either.

I started working for NHS Direct [the predecessor body to NHS 111] as a health adviser answering the phone. I loved the fact that we were looking after patients and found the call centre environment very interesting. Essentially, I never left! I worked as a health adviser for NHS Direct for the next five years, working my way up to become a shift manager and, later, site lead for NHS Direct.

When NHS Direct was decommissioned, I moved to NHS 111 in an operations manager role, followed by service delivery manager, and a year ago I was appointed as strategic head for the 999 service as part of the ambulance trust.

What I do

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I'm responsible for everything from the phones being answered when the public ring us to ambulances arriving on scene. I look after the trust's three operational emergency centres, the support centre and our regional clinical hub/urgent care desk. The hub focuses on triage to make sure that patients are getting the most appropriate care, including making sure those who need to go to hospital do so.

I have a senior team who are responsible day to day for delivering the service and they manage a team of around 600 staff between them. My role is to support them, set strategic direction for trust operations and ensure we deliver high-quality performance standards.

In any given day, I'm working with three key stakeholders: managing meetings with my teams, providing the conduit between myself and the executive management team, and working with the people who commission our services and key clinical stakeholders across the north west.

The best bits and challenges

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The best part of my job is that I have the opportunity to improve patient care for 7.5 million people across the north west, and to ensure my staff work in a safe, positive and supportive environment.

The challenge is that we are only as effective as our partners - the hospitals, the STP (sustainability and transformation partnerships) strategies and other factors that can make the world more challenging. The weather is often a big factor for us and there are other things out of our control that I have to bear in mind. For example, if hospitals are at full capacity, and there's a heavy flow of patients into emergency departments, our crews can get caught waiting to hand over patients and therefore unable to respond to the next

emergency.

The other element is there's always more we can do and striking a balance between delivering effective change and balancing the priorities of change can be difficult. Ultimately there's always more than one really good thing to do and you have to decide which one to prioritise.

Life outside work

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There's a risk in senior leadership that your work comes home with you and it's an even greater risk when you work in a 24/7 care delivery environment.

But my priority is my family. I have a four year old son who doesn't care whether I'm picking up the phone, whether ambulances are getting to patients or the meetings I have on Monday! It's important that I spend quality time with my son at the weekend, not least because my fiancé also works for the NHS and works shifts. It's important to be able to switch off for a short period of time because it refreshes you come Monday.

Career plans and top tips for others

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I've always believed if you've got passion and the drive, you can progress. I've gone from a band 3 NHS post to an 8d one and I'm nothing special.

My advice is always to find something you like doing and are good at. We spend a lot of time at work and it's never too late to make a change. I'm very career focused and three years ago I set myself a target that I want to be an NHS chief executive at age 45. So I've got eight years to get to that point with most likely one role between where I am now and where I want to get to.

I've had mentorship for the last year and I'd very much like to participate in one of the NHS Leadership Academy programmes to help me make that transition into executive leadership.

I also think it's important to find leaders you can believe in and learn from. In my career I can think of three key individuals I've worked for who supported my development through mentorship, leadership and being providing opportunity. If you've got someone who

believes in you and you believe in them, then it's down to you as an individual.

When I was interviewed for this role I was clear with the interview panel about the support I wanted. Part of being a senior leader is appraising your own skill set and capacity and giving people the skills, knowledge and experience to be able to deliver the role themselves.

The NHS provides a true opportunity to start a career that can take you anywhere. I'd strongly advise anyone to consider working in the NHS because there's no substitute in terms of being able to go home and be able to say I've made a difference to actual patients and actual people.

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