



Podcast Transcript

Risk Never Sleeps

Episode 76

James Wellman

Ed Gaudet: Welcome to the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast, in which we learn about the people that are on the front lines, delivering and protecting patient care. I'm Ed Gaudet, the host of our program, and today I am pleased to be joined by James Wellman, the Vice President and Chief Information Officer at Nathan Littauer Health System. And I believe it's also a long-term care, right, nursing home as well?

James Wellman: Yeah. That's correct. We have a sniff and a long-term care facility attached to our hospital.

Ed Gaudet: Awesome. And you're in Gloversville, New York.

James Wellman: We are in Gloversville, New York, which is in the Adirondacks, and we're part of the above cities, which is Johnstown, New York, and Gloversville, New York.

Ed Gaudet: Nice. And you're close to Spac. We're going to talk about music in a second, but let's start off with your current role and your organization. So tell our listeners what you're doing, what you're up to these days.



James Wellman: Interestingly. So I'm Vice President and Chief Information Officer. Obviously, I have responsibility for IT. I also have responsibility here for our biomedical team and our health information management. So all of HI and medical records. And the interesting component here is with the CEO that when he was hiring this team, he's been here three years, and he's been restructuring this team as we're all coming in with the purpose. And part of my purpose is to not only do the roles that I'm assigned, but to help the organization as a whole as we try to figure out how to make small health care work in these challenging times.

Ed Gaudet: Excellent, excellent. And how big is the organization, roughly?

James Wellman: So it's licensed 74 beds, but we probably run a census of around 35, to be fair, 800 employees.

Ed Gaudet: Okay, great. How did you get into health care and IT in particular?

James Wellman: Accidentally. So I came out of the military. I was a military policeman, and I.

Ed Gaudet: I saw that. Thank you for your service.

James Wellman: Thank you. And I ... was a police officer. So I was doing that and applying for different roles, and decided that I wanted to work on a federal level and went back to school. Took a part time job in the IT department at the University of Kentucky and the Medical Center with no intention of this. And my part time job is now my career, 36 years plus later.

Ed Gaudet: Born and raised in Kentucky?

James Wellman: Yes, I was born in eastern Kentucky, grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, central Kentucky. That's where we call home, but we haven't been there in a while. We moved around the country a few times.

Ed Gaudet: Okay. I did basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky.



James Wellman: Oh, thank you for your service.

Ed Gaudet: Thank you. ... for electrical storms. I've never seen anything like it. Thunder and lightning storms that would be out there.

James Wellman: ... close to the goal?

Ed Gaudet: No, I did not.

James Wellman: It's an interesting tour. If you ever have the time to go up there and see.

Ed Gaudet: No, I hear that. Yeah. No, my time was brief. Basic training. And then I applied for a ROTC scholarship and was awarded that. And then I went in through field artillery. So I was a field artillery officer, went to Fort Sill, did some time ...

James Wellman: Lived at the place where I worked previously at Lawton-fort Sill.

Ed Gaudet: Lawton. Yeah. Oh, you worked at Lawton. Okay. Yeah, yeah, that's a wonderful place.

James Wellman: Yeah. My youngest daughter is still living there. We worked there for almost nine years.

Ed Gaudet: It's God's country. I remember they had a Red lobster there that I used to frequent. All right. So let's talk about your priorities over the next couple of years. What are your top three priorities?

James Wellman: Interesting. We're returning back to the basics here. One of the things that came in, what I really like was the opportunity to do a full assessment of the organization. And that's what we've been doing. We have a Meditech expense implementation that we really need to go back and optimize and refine. So we are focusing on basic operations and I take a tact of operations first, tech last.

James Wellman (cont'd): I always joke that if you don't have solid operations and a firm understanding of them and you keep trying to apply technology to fix everything, you have a tendency to just mess up faster. And we introduce weak links. And in today's cybersecurity world, that's the last thing we want to do. So we want to fully understand that. So meta tech optimization is our priority here. And we are introducing things like project management, governance, and these are just some basic things that are not within this organization. And so we are turning those on and teaching people and taking a lot of time to train and work with everybody to make how to do this smoothly and make the operation run cleanly. So it's not super techie exciting, but it is exciting in that what we do is we're also planning five years out and we are working with some interesting opportunities. We do have a couple of not quite ready for public conversation, but we are very early in some discussions with a couple developers and some large national groups. We work on some prior authorization AI technologies. We have a very good local company who works on a national basis but has a vested interest in health care in upstate New York. So we jumped on that opportunity right away. And so I'm really excited about that. I think that's something we'll be able to talk about probably in about 6 or 9 months; what we do. That's going to be a pretty interesting if we can make this go the way we think.

Ed Gaudet: We'd love to have you back on to talk about it. All right. Awesome. And so the governance work you talked about; is that, are you including AI as part of that work stream?

James Wellman: So it's interesting, we had a, when I joined and I've only been in the organization since August of 2023, so I haven't even been here for a year. And our chief medical officer, who's also our chief medical information officer, joined about a week before me, and he has really embraced AI. And we have a great relationship. It's exciting that we're working with this. But we're also, again, founded back in reality. I just left HIMSS, and I think every other word out of every speaker's mouth was AI. And so you always look at that and it's like everything else we've been at this a long time. There's never a magic button. We all look for the easy button, but we can absolutely use it. But we need to control it and how this can help us. But there's some very interesting technologies around virtual nursing, augmentation, just to improve our outcomes for our patients. And that's an exciting component. It's also difficult when you're at a smaller organization because we have to get it right the first time. You're challenged.

James Wellman (cont'd): I don't have any much flexibility to start down that road with a partner that's not going to succeed. So we're not going to be on the bleeding edge of anything. We're a little bit behind the leading edge as a matter of fact with that. And part of that is, like I said, we need to fix those operations first, but we absolutely have it in mind and we're building around that as well.

Ed Gaudet: In the same way the internet impacted our world, AI has this unique ability to democratize technology and really give the smaller organizations the same power and the same capability of the larger organizations now.

James Wellman: And that's the exciting part. I think we look at these things, and it's a challenge. I do not have the breath of people knocking down at my door saying, Hey, let me work there at your hospital. It's a small area, it's rural, and I'm here by choice, and I like that. That's a challenge I've been working with for several years, so it's exciting. But now this is a level playing field at some things. We always say there's absolutely, we can get big results here. We can do the things that that they can do at larger hospitals. And this brings that ability for us to do that. In fact, we're working with some of these larger organizations and partnerships to improve the higher acuity and doing that through those technologies; that's a way we can provide more for our families. And I think that's really important. When you're healing and you're in need, I think the family is a huge component of that. One of the reasons why I have stayed in the community health and rural health arena, it speaks to me. So if we can bring the technology to bear, to allow a sicker patient to stay closer to family, I think that's a huge improvement in their ability to recover and have a better quality of life.

Ed Gaudet: And I think you have this unique position to maybe lead that effort across the industry and provide that blueprint for smaller organizations to really embrace the technology and start to apply it to their smaller organizations. So that's pretty exciting.

James Wellman: Yes. And sometimes we have to go out there and bring them to us. It's easier. I've worked at an extremely large health care like the University of Kentucky, which was much, much larger. And so it's easier to bring things on, and people are showing up at your door. But here we have to vet those very cautiously.

James Wellman (cont'd): So it's been relationships that I've been building over the years in my position, and that makes it a little easier for me to go and talk to people. In fact, the one event that I, or the one project that I was mentioning earlier does involve a pretty large national company or international company for that matter, who I have worked in those relationships really hard for the last 8 or 9 years. So we hope for that will pay off.

Ed Gaudet: Awesome. We'll check back in and we'll get an update in a couple 6 to 9 months. You've been there a short period of time, but are there things already that keep you up at night?

James Wellman: Obviously cybersecurity. We were impacted by change, thankfully not as bad as others. That's a big lift. The state of New York is moving forward with what is probably going to be the most stringent cybersecurity healthcare laws in the country. I have 100% vetted that, but it's pretty challenging to find anybody else that's going to have to be doing the things that they do. At least is not a completely unfunded mandate in this regard. And so they put some money out there for grants. And we've been really actively working on this. Fortunately, that was one of the first things that I did when I came, was, what's our cybersecurity look like? That was pretty much a day one thing, and we started down the pathway of talking to multiple vendors. So when this came about, we were already in conversation and it wasn't a knee-jerk reaction for us. So we've selected a vendor that we're working with and planning it. And if everything goes according to what we're told, we'll have one year from the date that the law is signed sometime in the next two months to get that implemented. So that becomes a huge lift and a priority for an organization like ours. I don't have CISOs sitting around here. No one can find them. So you know how hard it is to recruit them in Gloversville, New York.

Ed Gaudet: As you look out, it's been a rough couple of years for folks in healthcare with the pandemic and then dealing with the after effects of that. What are you most personally or professionally proud of?

James Wellman: I think obviously our ability to be flexible. Everybody's beat it to death. Telemedicine became something we want to do to something that's accepted and it's every single day.

James Wellman (cont'd): But for me, it was the ability to grow the organizations where I've worked and meet the need for the people that we had. At the same time, finding a balancing act between working people from home, working people locally, I discovered that I'm very big on allowing people to remote work, and I don't want to babysit them every day, and I don't want to put monitoring tools on there. And the teams responded to that. We gauged people, they work remote, the same way we gauge them that work in the office next door. Look at your productivity. Are you meeting your timelines? Are you meeting your obligations? That's what we do. I don't care where you sit. I just want to get the work done. And so I've actually proud of the maintained a lot of our teams and did not have the turnover like at my previous location that we were seeing. You didn't see that churn because we adapted quickly. I think the leadership and the relationships are critically important in that. And in our role, that's so important for what I do. My technology skills and things might have atrophied a bit from what they were back in the day when some of the things I were doing, you don't want to cut me loose on a switch or anymore on the network. But I understand the concept. But I'm proud of the leadership that we've shown during this time, and I've seen some places that struggled with that. And so that has long-lasting impacts on the organization as a whole.

Ed Gaudet: All right. Let's get to some questions now about you. Outside of healthcare IT, what would you be doing? What are you most passionate about?

James Wellman: I think one of the things that's most exciting for me outside of the healthcare component, but within my role, I like working with people in the mentoring phase, working on their education, having people that go back to school. I've kept track of it, have over 18 teams that I've worked with over the years that have returned to school, have completed their degrees, completed their master's degrees, and all ages in their 20s and their 60s. And I just think that's an exciting component to keep learning. It just really spoke to me. And I'm also the same person that did it. I arrived in the technology space in the late 80s with a knack to work on equipment, and it took off, and I found I had a knack to do this. So suddenly, I was really busy, and school was not something I completed, so it took a long time. So I got selected for a leadership program and the person with two PhDs was asking me which PhD I was working on. I had to tell him I didn't even have an associate's degree.

James Wellman (cont'd): I had over 100 credit hours, no degree. And so she was a wonderful mentor. I went back to school and then our charts through all the way through a master's in healthcare administration. But again, I had quality mentors in my life, so that's really important to me to try to pay back and do the same thing and teach some of those leadership lessons that I learned the hard way.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, no. That's awesome. I do the same thing and I don't track it. Maybe I should have. That's a great idea. I love the random call I get. You know, remember that thing you told me to do? Like I did it, and it actually made the difference, like, Oh no, you listen to me.

James Wellman: Yeah, it's exciting because you get people come in. And this one, I know it's stresses people out, but I also take the time to the people that are on our teams that we're teammates together. And if they get a wonderful opportunity that's outside of my organization, I'm writing a letter for them. Because they said, I got the degree, I've got the credentials. I can do this. You've helped me with the other stuff. And that's wonderful. I don't see that as a bad thing, that I'm losing people in that way. I don't look at it, I'm losing them. We're just feeding them into the system that we're creating strong leaders and strong team members that go out there. That to me is those people can come back and say, Hey, help me. That's a pretty cool feeling.

Ed Gaudet: Amen. I have two people that are leaving me and they've got references for life like it doesn't, it's a good thing to go and look at other opportunities and learn from other people, and I think it's wonderful. I love that.

James Wellman: And I've hired most people back.

Ed Gaudet: I love that; when they come back.

James Wellman: That grass was, I was making more money, but the environment was not the same. And I've hired them back a few times, or I've hired them back for a really wonderful promotion within our organization as well.

Ed Gaudet: Isn't that wonderful? I try to explain to folks that like, money's important, and obviously people want to be paid a fair rate and wage and you got to do the right thing. But ultimately, people, most people don't leave because of that, and they leave because their boss is a tyrant or they're not getting challenged enough, or they're not having the experience that they thought they were going to have when they went in. So it tends to be a gap between expectations.

James Wellman: It's, absolutely. I mean, I've been at this a while, I've done that. I've moved on because I'm like, I want something different. And I also look at myself at one point, and a pivotal part of my career was having to come up with the professional epiphany and the personal epiphany that I was a terrible manager, I was awful. You would not have wanted to work. At the time, I would say you wouldn't want to work for me, and I've removed that kind of conversation or those language from my conversation. We work with me, we work with worst teammates. But once I figured out that I wasn't very good, and again, with a strong mentor, a CIO, we really fortunately saw something and helped me and guided me, and I made those changes and my career took off because of that. I didn't get stuck in the Peter Principle where I get promoted to a point and that was it.

Ed Gaudet: I love that. I love that, yeah. Someone told me a long time ago, You manage inventories, you lead people. You never manage people, you have to lead them.

James Wellman: And yeah, it's, there's so everything we do is relationships, especially at this level.

Ed Gaudet: All right. So you go back in time, sir. Your 20 or 25-year-old self is standing in front of you. What would you tell him?

James Wellman: Part of it was be patient. I think one of the things that gets in here, sometimes everybody feels like they have to have it all figured out. And I came back, and about that time. I didn't understand the concept of a job and a career truly, on paper, and by definition, yes. But finding that passion, I always thought it was a hokey kind of thing. Find something you love and go work doing it. And I found out that I can help people through IT.

James Wellman (cont'd): But at 25, I was just hammering as hard as I could and trying to go at it and maybe got a little bit ahead of myself. And so be patient, be thoughtful about what you want to do. And make clear decisions and not knee-jerk reactions. And so that's something that as I matured, I changed that a little bit, and listen to hear people and what they have to say. That's one of the biggest challenges and quote, again, they're all cliches. But they're cliches, I think sometimes, for a reason, because they're so true and we deal with it every day. And I know I deal with every day and, you know, not listening to respond and understanding the problems. We see this and basic things around like cybersecurity. Oh yeah, I know what this is. And they don't understand the concepts. Those kind of little basic things have huge impacts later on. So be patient, be thoughtful, and make good decisions.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. We have two ears and one mouth for a reason. I have to ask you this question. This is the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. What's the riskiest thing you've ever done?

James Wellman: Probably rappelling off the side of a 50-story building.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, I did it out of an airplane, or out of a helicopter.

James Wellman: In the Army, I had jumped out of a few on the helicopters as well. But I was on the, an Army SRT, which is like a SWAT team. So we were doing a demo and working with it, and it was real interesting. So you would essentially spider crawl upside down off the side of a building and peer in through a window and do different things. So it was fun. Fortunately, I never had to do that in a real-life situation, so it was just a demo. But it will get your attention when you look down and go, That's a long way down and I'm on a rope.

Ed Gaudet: I know. You guys do a really good job. No one's below.

James Wellman: Yeah, no, not in that situation.

Ed Gaudet: In that situation.

James Wellman: At first, it was jumping out of helicopters, but then that became a little more, Okay, this isn't as bad. You still were careful, but they took care of the risk for you. And we were young and bulletproof we got.

Ed Gaudet: That's right. All right. So we talked about music earlier. You said you're a member of the Saratoga Springs Art Center, SPAC, formerly known as SPAC. And I attended a couple of shows there last year. What shows are you going to this year?

James Wellman: So exciting. We are headed to James Taylor. We got some early ones for that. Justin Taylor. I'm trying to think the part of this that they have a long pass. We missed out on just not being new; we didn't understand. So we did not jump into the long passes, but now we're buying them independently. So there's a whole lot of shows, show for everything. Hootie and the Blowfish.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, nice.

James Wellman: I will come in. So I think I can sit in the lawn and relax and enjoy a 17 ...

Ed Gaudet: I feel like we're the same generation. Like, are you the Atari 2600 generation?

James Wellman: Oh, yeah. ..., what was your first, my first gaming cartridge was this, and my first computer was a C64 with the tape drive. I thought I was, I was something.

Ed Gaudet: That's awesome. Dungeons and Dragons?

James Wellman: Yeah, I actually have my original books from the 80s.

Ed Gaudet: You do? Oh, yeah. Man, those are fantastic.

James Wellman: Then it was interesting. Now that I'm seeing this resurgence in it, it seems like we're now that it's out of the back room. It's crazy seeing these huge stars are like, Oh no, we have Dungeons and Dragons days. And we played it for the whole weekend.

Ed Gaudet: They do? Yeah, I love that.

James Wellman: I was like, Oh wow. We thought it was fun. We actually played in the Army.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, you did? Oh no kidding.

James Wellman: Yeah. Oh, we had 24-hour shifting where I was in Europe. And so finding something to do and she's had to sit there and stay awake for the whole time. We played Dungeons and Dragons.

Ed Gaudet: Do you still have your characters? Do you remember what your characters were, or?

James Wellman: I've got the books, but it's been a while, so I kind of got taken over. And of course I went on through the, all the iterations and I've stepped away from that. I just, I don't.

Ed Gaudet: I know, yeah.

James Wellman: It's always good to go back and look at it though. I think I stopped Warcraft and I think my kids like got me like, Dad, you gotta probably maybe stop. So.

Ed Gaudet: I have a friend that still, he told me he stopped gaming, but he had a gaming chair and it's pretty.

James Wellman: I might do a couple things on the iPhone, but I'm not going to wake up at 3:00 in the morning and go do a raid with somebody these days.

Ed Gaudet: That's not going to see in front of Tempest or defend. Oh, I.

James Wellman: I think I'll just, I'll look back. I was like, Oh, that was a good time. And I'm.

Ed Gaudet: Cool. All right. So desert island, you can bring five albums with you. What would they be?

James Wellman: Wow. Five? I'm all over the place. So Squeeze 45 singles. Squeeze band. Warren Zevon.

Ed Gaudet: Nice.

James Wellman: Absolutely one of my all-time favorite. His greatest hits. But it's his, some of his stuff is just so eclectic. And it was so good. That's an interesting poet and underappreciated and so many people like songs if they don't even know or his. So he's always a really fun one for me. Beach Boys, Heads Down.

Ed Gaudet: I'm going to your desert island, sir.

James Wellman: Yeah. Three for me already. But then we're going to go way out in left field. And I'm a huge Bluegrass fan. Bill Monroe guy. I always ask which ones, which songs sound like Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs. I just like the sound of it, I think maybe obviously being from Kentucky, that might, that might play into that a little bit. I grew up around it quite a bit and what we did. And then we'd go back into the country and play Waylon Jennings.

Ed Gaudet: Nice. Okay. That's cool.

James Wellman: Waylon was, he was somebody that...

Ed Gaudet: Original outlaw.

James Wellman: Yeah, it was just an honest, it was just who he was. I always liked that. For my last one, I'll throw in there, it'll be James Taylor.



Ed Gaudet: Okay. James Taylor.

James Wellman: And I'm really I've never seen them. So I'm really excited to go and see him in concert this year.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, that's going to be a great show. I'm jealous. Hopefully, they'll bring you some special guests. We talked about the Dead End. I don't know if you've heard of or listened to any Jerry Garcia Bluegrass, but you should check it out if you like Bluegrass. He did a couple sessions there.

James Wellman: There were some people, if they go back into the Dillards, it kind of transitioned to the folk and stuff. I'm a frustrated wannabe musician. I used to play violin and fiddle and just quit in high school for some reason. I never took it up again. I keep trying to get back. So now I'm looking at a guitar. I got to start taking lessons again.

Ed Gaudet: I was drums in high school. I had a band in high school. I quit and I tried to get one, a couple of my daughters to play, and then I played when one of my daughters took to it. I just could never get the guitar down.

James Wellman: It's never too late. So we have a hospital band and they play all over the region and they lit our sets. Yeah, it's pretty neat. The CEO's wife is the lead singer. The vice president of our HR is our drummer. We have the chair of our OB department is lead guitarist.

Ed Gaudet: I love that. I did the same thing. I worked at Imprivata. You probably know of Imprivata, the tapping go, folks. And I started a house band there. And we had people from support and finance and product and it was fantastic. It's like.

James Wellman: Yeah, and they're really good. So I went to their very first introduction, introductory concert. They knew a few songs, now they're around 50 and now they're getting booked at different places all around the region. It's pretty fun. So they play at our events, obviously, but they're just playing at bars at Saint Patrick's Day. That was pretty neat.



Ed Gaudet: We only did company shows events, but.

James Wellman: That was the intent, I think. But they're really good. And they got a good type. They sound really good. So it's fun.

Ed Gaudet: Cool. Last question. What advice would you give to folks that are first trying to break into cybersecurity or IT or healthcare?

James Wellman: So one of the things that I think is really important when we talk about actually any of cybersecurity or IT when we're specific to the healthcare space, understand your mission. I had it slammed into my face when a friend's, a good friend of mine, when I was there, we had to just put some new technology into our trauma center at the University of Kentucky, and he was the first person that went through that process. And it was a bit gut-wrenching, but it really drove home why we're here. You can do, to support, network support any industry, but understand the mission of healthcare. And I think that's really critical. It's really important. We're here 24/7, 365, and understand why you're here and find that passion. I tell everybody that comes in that's a really important component. It could be you, your family, somebody you love, somebody you care about that's seeking the service at that organization, and you want it to be the best. And I think when you approach it that way, it changes the way you approach your job. So if you just want to fix PCs and do whatever or work on a network and that's your passion, that's great. But if you're going to do it in health care, understand truly why we're here and how we impact people in all, some of the most vulnerable states in life, some of their happiest states in life. But that's a really important component. And I said, take the time to understand your industry. And I think that's important regardless of your industry. But in health care, I'm passionate about the fact that of what we do, and I've heard it years ago, boot camp, and I've always, I said it and I was like, Oh, wow. I said, We save lives in IT. And I don't touch patients but everything we do has a direct impact on our clinical providers, and I want to give them the best absolute system that they can use to do the best job possible.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. Amen said. Great advice. Yeah. It's never been truer. Right? IT is and technology is part and parcel with care delivery.



James Wellman: We've lived through where it went from, Oh we can't wait to go back to paper to now it's, a system goes down, the world is ending. It's the way we can use paper.

Ed Gaudet: That's right. No paper, please. Not that.

James Wellman: Yeah. So we've come full circle, but they depend on us. And so that's part of it. They depend on us. So be there for them.

Ed Gaudet: That's right. All right. I appreciate your time, James. Thanks for joining the podcast. This is Ed Gaudet from the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. And remember, if you're on the front lines protecting patient safety and delivering patient care to stay vigilant because Risk Never Sleeps.



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