



Podcast Transcript

Risk Never Sleeps

Episode 86

Pam Austin

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 Pam Austin, Chief Information Officer at Ballad Health. Hi, Pam. Welcome. Hey.

Pam Austin: Hey. Good afternoon. Thank you.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, I'm glad to have you on the program. Let's start off with, just give listeners a sense for your current role in your organization.

Pam Austin: Okay, sure. I, of course, I am over all technology at Ballad Health, and I've worked here for my whole career, practically 28 years, all in IT, all here for this health care system. And if you're not familiar with Ballad Health, we are located in northeast Tennessee. And we are, we cover a 29-county region with 21 hospitals. And so I'm over all the technology for the entire health system. And I have a team of eight people that report directly to me. And then those folks have managers and directors and analysts that report up to them. We have about 400 people in our department, which includes analysts, engineers, clinical folks, clinical informaticists, and service desk. We run the whole gamut as we, our job is to deliver the epic EMR to our clinicians. So that's one of the things that we do in IT that covers a pretty big footprint in our department.



Ed Gaudet: Excellent. And how did you get into health care?

Pam Austin: I stumbled into health care, actually, back when I was starting my career, I thought I wanted to be an accountant until I started taking the accounting classes. And then I decided, I don't want to do this. This is not for me.

Ed Gaudet: I went to Bentley University. It's an accounting school. Had a very similar experience. Yeah.

Pam Austin: Yeah. So I was too far in to go, Okay, Turn around now. So I changed it to, from accounting to business administration, and the focus was more on IT. So I actually found a job at a health care system. Before we ever merged and became a health care system here, I worked at one of the hospitals as part of our merged organization now as a liaison between IT and finance, which is perfect for me, right? Because I had that background and I wanted to get into IT, and it was a job that the IT department had. So at that time, this was like in the late 90s, man, that was last century. So that position there, they had several liaisons; had financial liaison, had a clinical liaison. So they just hired the people that basically I call it an interpreter of IT to finance or finance to IT. So that's how I got into IT. And then once I was in that position, I supported, of course, the accounting side, it just took off from there and I got very interested in the operations of IT and just asked, What else can I do? What else can I learn? Can I, what projects can I do? And just you have to be careful what you ask for, right? Because you might get it. It just went from there. And that's how I got into healthcare and that's how I ended up. I did not have CIO on my career aspirations. It just, there's a whole story behind how that happened. But I'm extremely grateful to be serving in this position for our region, for our health care system, and for the team that I have.

Ed Gaudet: I love that, I love that. I could hear the servant leadership too, ring through. And what a great skill to be able to talk to finance. I'm sure, pretty handy now in your career, later in life, right?

Pam Austin: Very much is. When you get a large portion of the organization's capital dollars, you've got to be able to speak that and explain it.

Ed Gaudet: Exactly. I've talked to a few customers and obviously guests on the show about Change Healthcare. Any learnings that you could share with listeners if you had gone through it? I'm not sure if Ballad had actually gone through a little bit or a lot. I'm finding it's on both ends of the spectrum. Either you were impacted a lot or actually maybe a very little because you had an alternative supplier.

Pam Austin: Yeah. We are we weren't impacted by that cyber breach because we're not a customer of theirs in that effort. So anything that we would have been impacted, let's say would have been very minimal.

Ed Gaudet: Got it.

Pam Austin: So if there was something.

Ed Gaudet: Did it make you think about or change any of the processes that you have internally because of it?

Pam Austin: Yeah. Every time there's a breach, just like Ascension had one recently, we step back and look and analyze what occurred there, what caused that and what caused this. And then we analyze internally, do we have the same situation that could potentially happen to us? And what do we have in place that we might need to change? So it gives us an opportunity to step back and review what happened in their scenario and could that be repeated here at Ballad. So that's what we do every time we see a breach. Like, I'm waiting to hear what's happened here with Ascension to see if there's something that maybe there's a hole there that we don't know about that's happened with them. We do change our processes based on some outcomes of situations like this, but more than anything, we review what we have compared to what's happened in their areas.

Ed Gaudet: That's a really good discipline. Thanks for that. So if you think about things like AI and the impact AI is having for some providers, what are you doing internally?

Ed Gaudet (cont'd): Have you set up a, for example, I've heard of organizations that are setting up governance committees now and that are cross-functional in nature. And how are you dealing with the assessment of AI as it relates to Ballad?

Pam Austin: Yeah, AI is a hot topic. It is probably the hottest topic for 2024. It was in 2023. And AI is not something new. It's been around forever; it feels like, for my whole career anyway, different aspects it's taken on. It's definitely matured. But I recently stood up a governance committee that is IT, compliance, and risk in our legal department. And what we're doing is I use, I'm using those folks because of the legal aspect, the risk aspect, the compliance aspect, of course, IT. And we're putting together a policy. Here's what that Ballad Health policy is going to be. We've, we actually started with some guiding principles. We can't find anyone in the insurance industry yet. And I've talked to a lot of people that has a policy. So I'm hopeful that our policy can be something others can use. And we're looking at it strictly from a technology standpoint, and this is the way we're going to vet what we use with AI. And of course, us being an Epic shop for our electronic health record. Epic has its own set of AI. They have 60 models that are about to come out or have come out that we need to analyze and determine which ones do we need, which ones are we going to use? It's educating our organization on what AI is, how it needs to be implemented here, how it's different from other industries. Right? You see this in other industries, but in healthcare it's a little different. We might use it from a workflow standpoint for one thing. Another thing is helping make a diagnosis of a patient. So we're just touching the surface of what that policy end is going to be like, or what the content is going to be; we're pretty close. But we've got a long way to go and a lot of education, a lot more education to do.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, yeah. And it's pretty common. Obviously, that's a priority. What are some of the other priorities you have over the next year to two years?

Pam Austin: Yeah, of course, cybersecurity is always going to be on my list. But taking it a little bit different aspect is in my IT strategic plan, which Ballad Health has its own organizational-level strategic plan. And then we have a strategic plan in IT that aligns back to the organization. Because technology is somewhat different. We always want to be ahead of the organization. So when they get there and go, Okay, we want this, we've already paid. We're ready. We've paved a path.

Pam Austin (cont'd): Running IT as a business is something we're continuing to do, educating the organization on what IT does, what value we bring to the organization. Or we're more than keeping the internet running. We're more than taking all the capital for the organization. And here's the value that we bring that you're not seeing on the back end. That's one of the marketing IT basically to the organization is high on my list. That might seem like an odd thing to put there, but I'm always going to have cybersecurity. I'm always going to have things like that. And it's the items within my strategic plan that are the priority: keeping the organization safe and secure, innovating, innovation; what does that look like? And just educating the organization on all the different aspects of IT, and why things cost what they do and why we have to spend time analyzing risk assessments, why do we have to go through all this process to understand. There's quite a few things on my list that we have on our plan. Customer service. Taking customer service to the next level is definitely something on our plan from a service delivery standpoint. We have a brand new IT, PMO process that we literally just initiated in late February. Actually, it may be early March. And that in and of itself is to educate the organization on the sheer volume of requests that we get in IT, and it shows them, it puts back to my peers, plus leaders above me, Here's everything it's being asked to do. Are these the initiatives you want us to work on? And if they're not, what are the priorities? Asking them to prioritize the work that we're doing. Because it doesn't matter to us what work we do. We can do all of it. But in order to do all of it, here's what it takes in a way of people, resources, time, all of those things. That's going to be, that, those things that I just described aren't everything, but there's some of the most critical things for the organization. It's really educating. Here's what we do in IT.

Ed Gaudet: I love that. And driving that alignment too, through the culture as well, that technology is an enabler, and we want to make sure we're all understanding the implications of behaviors that may be at odds with technology like shadow IT. We want to reduce, obviously, the instances of shadow IT as much as possible so we can perform those risk assessments, we can keep the organization secure. I love that. What keeps you up at night?

Pam Austin: It would be several things. The risk to the organization from a cyber standpoint. That's always going to be on my mind because you're just one click away somebody's clicking on an email to giving away the keys to the kingdom so to say.

Pam Austin (cont'd): Am I being a good leader to my organization or my organization and to my team because I'm not perfect, right? I need constant improvement. Every day is a new day. What I did yesterday is different from what I'm going to do today. What can I do to help alleviate the stress and the pressure and the things that keep them up at night as well? So building just a trait, a level of trust within my team, that part doesn't keep me up at night, but it's being the leader I need to be for the organization.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, I love that. And putting yourself out there, making yourself vulnerable so people can actually engage because oftentimes people tend to, we, I've been told you're intimidating and I'm really not. You can have any type of conversation with me. But yeah, no, I love that. Over the last couple of years, tough with the pandemic, obviously, and all the pressures on health systems, what are you most personally or professionally proud of?

Pam Austin: I've got a great one, a great story to tell here. I was promoted to CIO in February of 2020.

Ed Gaudet: Good timing.

Pam Austin: Yeah. Oh, it gets better. It gets better. Let me tell you this. In February of 2020, but I have to back up to tell this story. In February 1st of 2018, Ballad Health came into existence from a merger of two healthcare systems in our region to form Ballad Health. As soon as we merged, our goal was part of the system was on Epic already. Part was on the part that I came from Mountain States was on a different EMR. Our goal was to get on a common EMR. We set out 2018. Let's get on this plan to get Epic implemented and our go-live dates. And we picked this back in 2018, 2019ish, 2018 time frame late in that year. Jain, we would go live June 1st of 2020 and October 1st of 2020. That's on the ambulatory side and the acute side. We have this plan. Here I come along going, Hey, let me explain the plan that you have is not going to work. And that's intimidating when I'm the second in command in IT at that point. So I have a new CIO who came about as part of the merger. And I'm like, Okay, that plan is not going to work. Here's what we have to do. And Oh, by the way, we're going to need \$25 million. And I need to go ask the board for that. So it was a very, I'm not going to say a scary time.

Pam Austin (cont'd): It was one of those points in time where you have to step up and say, Here's what it's going to take to do. So I did that. Then things changed. Time changed. People change. My CIO retired. They promoted me in February of '20. And so my charge was this. Keep in mind we were still early and still planning Epic, right? So we implement Epic at 12 hospitals and a 200-physician practice different locations three months apart. In addition to Microsoft had decommissioned Windows 7. We were on the journey of implementing Windows 10. Every single PC in the organization had to be replaced in order to go to Windows 10. My Jesus February of '20 got implemented epic in June. I got to get Epic in October. I've got to replace 16,000 PCs in this organization, go live on Windows 10 all while we're trying to get Epic in them. Then the pandemic comes and it's March and it's April and it's May. Suddenly, we got to still go live June 1st at the clinics. We made the go-live date. We're on time. We had to pivot some things. We had to do, we had to immediately figure out, Okay, we've got to learn how to educate folks. Not in a classroom. We got to do it on teams. We got to do it on Zoom. We got to do it. How are we going to do this? Right? So we're doing this as, we're making it up as we go.

Ed Gaudet: You're learning. Exactly.

Pam Austin: And we had to send all the corporate departments home. So we have to now, Okay, how are we going to, we've got to make some changes technologically to make that happen.

Ed Gaudet: VPNs. You need more VPNs.

Pam Austin: We had to make all those changes. Thankfully, we made our go-live dates. Both of those. We didn't miss a beat, but we did have to, we struggled through it. That's the most, best story I can tell you my entire career. Who would have thought in the world I'd be the CIO? And here comes a pandemic. And oh by the way, here's all the things you got to do by the end of this calendar year. Plus, we had to have new hardware set up, a new, we redesigned our data center network. We had oh, and we implemented New Active Directory. We had to get everybody on a common Active Directory because we were on two separate. So everybody had to come onto Exchange. And anyway, I'm probably telling you too much information.



Ed Gaudet: No. That's amazing.

Pam Austin: That's the highlight of my career. I will never forget that.

Ed Gaudet: When did you get the final device updated to Windows 10?

Pam Austin: We had to get, okay, so for the clinics we made that by June 1st.

Ed Gaudet: You did? Okay.

Pam Austin: The hospitals had to be done by October 1st. We had to have those in place before we could go live on Epic, because Epic wouldn't run on those PCs.

Ed Gaudet: Right. Yeah. Oh, incredible. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

Pam Austin: Oh my gosh, I didn't think I would survive 2020. Not because of a pandemic though.

Ed Gaudet: I know it. So outside of healthcare and IT what would you be doing? What are you most passionate of?

Pam Austin: A lot of things. I love to travel. My husband and I love to travel. I love to scuba dive. I like any kind of physical activity that I can do. That's, whether it's exercise or things like scuba diving. But primarily it's, I'm, I don't have a lot of time outside of work, but those are the things. And I just started two months ago taking piano lessons. So something I've always wanted to do. Yeah. So now I'm learning to play piano, but I love to listen to music. I love to go to concerts. University of Tennessee football.

Ed Gaudet: Okay. You have a lot of interests. We're gonna get to the music question in a second. What would you tell your, if you could go back in time, would you tell your 20-year-old self?

Pam Austin: Oh my gosh, a thousand things. I would. Oh, but who I am today. I want to go back and say you made it to that 25-year-old. You did it. She's counting on me, right? She's counting on me. You made it. In the career that I have, it doesn't define who I am as a person. But that career is self-made, right? And it's only for me, in my satisfaction. Right? So I would tell her, Don't worry so much. You're going to make it. Don't take yourself too seriously. You can't control everything and not everything is in your control. And just stay true to yourself and you just keep marching forward and enjoy the ride. Take time to have fun.

Ed Gaudet: Love that. Enjoy the ride. I love that. It's so true. Yeah. Can you imagine what we get? We're so anxious at a young age. And if we only knew then what we know now about things. They say, Youth is wasted on the young or something like that. Anyway. All right. So if, this is the riskiest, this is the Risk Never Sleeps, not the riskiest podcast but the Risk Never Sleeps podcast. What's the riskiest thing we've ever done, Pam?

Pam Austin: Do you mean professionally, personally, or either?

Ed Gaudet: Either.

Pam Austin: Either. I would have to say it's scuba diving because I, it took me a while to really decide this is what I want to do, and now I love it. So I would say that, and I mulled that question over and over in my mind and think, what else would it be? It could be crossing the street at this point.

Ed Gaudet: That's true. Scuba diving is risky. What's the most interesting dive you've been on?

Pam Austin: Okay, I've been quite a few places. We went to Fiji. It's beautiful. Bon Air down in the Caribbean is probably the most beautiful place, but Cozumel, Mexico is the most beautiful diving that we've been to. Now, mind you, somebody else might hear that and go, Oh, no, you need to go to the Red sea. You need to go Thailand, or where? I haven't done those. Those are on my list. Right? The places I've been in the United States, funny enough, at Key Largo. Florida is beautiful. In fact, I'm going there next month. We're going to dive next month. But a lot of it's in the Caribbean.



Ed Gaudet: Yeah, excellent. A lot of wrecks, I assume, you go into. Yeah.

Pam Austin: Yeah. My husband loves the cave dive. He likes the wrecks. I prefer the coral reefs and the fish. So that's more my style.

Ed Gaudet: No sharks.

Pam Austin: No, but I've seen a few.

Ed Gaudet: I bet you have. I was in Aruba a couple of years ago, and I swam with a shark, so that was not fun.

Pam Austin: I did a dive with, at the Atlanta Aquarium. It's the diving with the whale sharks. Oh, I don't know if you've ever seen a whale shark, but they're about as big as a school bus in size. they had three in that tank.

Ed Gaudet: That seems like that's pretty risky.

Pam Austin: Yeah. So maybe that.

Ed Gaudet: All right, so you're stuck on a desert island. You could bring five records, albums with you or movies. What would you do? Or both.

Pam Austin: Oh, gosh, this is so hard because there's so many things that I could say here. I don't know if I can fully answer that, but don't laugh at this. But I put down Journey's Greatest Hits because.

Ed Gaudet: I love Journey. Come on.

Pam Austin: I do too, and it's my favorite. They're my favorite.

Ed Gaudet: I love Journey. So many great songs, even the old Journey.

Pam Austin: I love it. Yeah, I like the old stuff. It'd be a lot of things from the 80s. Gone With the Wind would be one of the movies that I would take. I'm not a passionate about a movie kind of person. I like Gone With the Wind. Of course, it has a great storyline. But are there other movies I would take? Probably more music than movies that I would take. I would take the Eagles' Greatest Hits. I would take some Styx. ... Speedwagon. I love the classic.

Ed Gaudet: Keep On Loving You. What a great song.

Pam Austin: Yeah, I've got, and another, I love Michael Jackson. I would take some of his albums, and these are actual vinyl albums that I still have from the 80s; I like to listen to here and there. So it would be that type of music that I would take.

Ed Gaudet: And I hear the Eagles are coming, supposedly rumored to be coming to the Sphere in Vegas as a residency. Yeah, I'm heading to the Sphere in June to go see these guys. Dead and company.

Pam Austin: Oh, yeah, that'd be good too.

Ed Gaudet: With John Mayer for a couple nights.

Pam Austin: Yeah. I love John Mayer.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah. He's incredible. All right. Last question. Any advice to recent grads that are trying to break into healthcare and or IT or both?

Pam Austin: Depending on what? Level they want to be at? Is it management? Is it, or trying to be an analyst and engineer?

Pam Austin (cont'd): I would suggest that you learn all you can about healthcare in your career, even if you're in an IT degree, you're trying to go for an IT degree, learn about healthcare along that journey, whether you take some extra healthcare classes or you learn on your own, but don't give up and keep trying. There's all different kinds of healthcare avenues that you can go in. You want to go in hospital? Do you want to be like what I did? There's a big IT need in healthcare. A lot of people don't think about that. But take the knowledge that if you're getting an IT degree and apply that to healthcare. You don't have to have a healthcare degree, right? We're looking for Microsoft engineers and engineers like that, that people don't often think, Oh, I'll go into healthcare so I can be an engineer doing that. But there is a lot of opportunities.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, and that shared mission is unlike any other industry. The ability to, everyone's a patient, everyone knows the patient, and be able to work in supporting the delivery of care and, or protecting patient care. It's just such a great profession.

Pam Austin: Yeah. And be willing to start at the bottom. You're not going to start at the top because you need to, you need the experience and you need the time, and you need to grow as a person and a professional. So take advantage of every one of those opportunities. Just start and go.

Ed Gaudet: Excellent. And with that, thank you, Pam, for joining the podcast today. This is Ed Gaudet from the Risk Never Sleeps podcast. If you're on the front lines protecting patient safety and delivering patient care, remember to stay vigilant because Risk Never Sleeps.



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