# 2026 SDMS Annual Conference

## Sonographers' Career Ladder Leading to Where?

### How the Demand for Sonographers Needs to Include Career Advancement





**Kevin D. Evans, PhD, Shawn C. Roll, PhD, & Carolyn M. Sommerich, PhD**

**2026 Stephen McLaughlin Memorial Lecture**

1

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## Objectives for this Lecture

1. Describe the ongoing survey research and the new analysis of participants' responses to open-ended questions about a sonographer's career and advancement.
2. Review the method for analyzing over 1000 unique responses, which were team analyzed for a deeper meaning of a sonography career.
3. Discuss how these responses can provide insights into retention, advancement, and overall recruitment to a career in sonography.
4. Provide actionable steps that can strengthen a career in sonography by administrators, educators, and staff sonographers.

5

## Building on Steve's Leadership



Lt-Rt: Coffin, Andrist, Evans, Koziol, Weinberg, Hall, & McLaughlin

- Steve's leadership laid the foundation for a period of significant SDMS membership growth.
- His dedication enabled investment in organizational growth, membership, and advocacy for sonographers and vascular technologist.
- As the immediate Past-President, he secured occupation recognition with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and advanced the same recognition within the Department of Veteran's Affairs.

6

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## McLaughlin's Legacy

- It is very hard to discuss my dear friend, as he suffered greatly with a diagnosed brain tumor shortly after my Presidential term began.
- Regardless of his health issues, he never missed a meeting, kept his ultrasound mobile business running, and was an ongoing force for the profession.



7

## Reflecting on a Career!



- After our dinner that night in Atlanta, Steve invited me to his hotel room.
- He opened a box and took out every one of his awards and certificates that he earned over his professional career.
- Behind each memento was a personal story and given his health concerns, he wanted to talk about each one.

8

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## WRMSD Longitudinal Survey

- Building on Steve's dream of a separate and distinct occupation, we should promote health, safety, and the ability for sonographers to experience profession growth.
- The WRMSD surveys are our team's effort to create an occupational health database that is based on the six completed surveys.
- In the future we aim to create a way for others to access our database to securely compare workplace risk and benefits for proposed improvements.
- We need your assistance to keep building this very important occupational resource.



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9

WRMSD Grand Challenge

Longitudinal Survey Study

**The Value of Conducting a Longitudinal Study on Well-Being and Risk for Work-Related Musculoskeletal Injuries in Ultrasound Users**

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The objective of this longitudinal work is to better understand **collective practice patterns** and examine the relationship of sonographic **work conditions and performance** to the user's health and well-being.

June/Nov 2021 → June 2022 → July 2023 → Aug 2024 → Sept 2025 → June 2026

10

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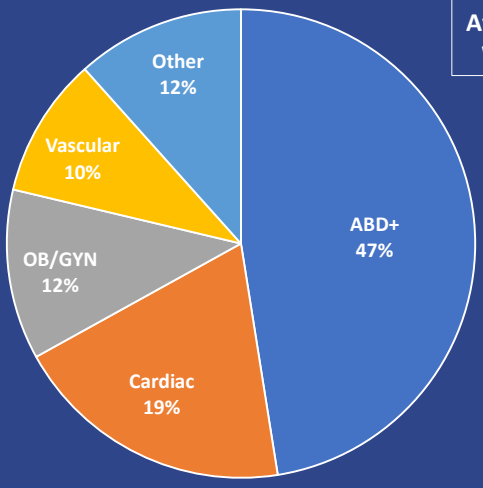
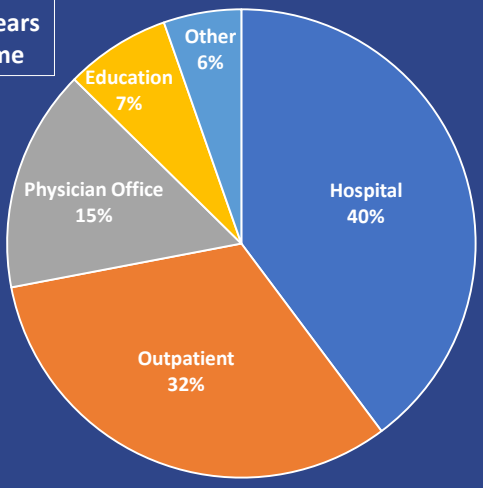
## Respondent Demographics (n=1023)

**Primary Specialty**




**Gender: 87.9% Female**
**Avg (SD) Age: 52.1 (11.0) Years**
**Work Type: 74.1% Full-Time**

**Practice Setting**




11

## Personal Job Outlook

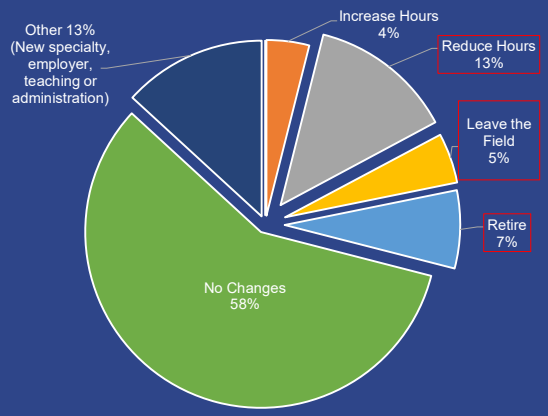
Job Satisfaction
- Very or Somewhat Satisfied: 89.7% (n=909)
- Not Too Satisfied: 7.4% (n=75)
- Not at All Satisfied: 2.9% (n=29)

Likelihood of Making a Change (e.g., hours, employer)
- Very Likely: 15.8% (n=160)
- Somewhat Likely: 19.0% (n=192)
- Not Too Likely or Not at All Likely: 65.2% (n=659)

Likelihood of an Unexpected Change (e.g., lose job)
- A Certainty or Very Likely: 3.5% (n=35)
- Somewhat Likely: 20.0% (n=202)
- Not at All Likely: 76.5% (n=772)

Concern or Worry About Unexpected Change
- Always or Often: 9.3% (n=94)
- Occasionally: 40.0% (n=404)
- Never: 50.7% (n=512)

Work Plans for the Upcoming Year (n=1017)




25% will reduce work hours, leave the field, or retire

12

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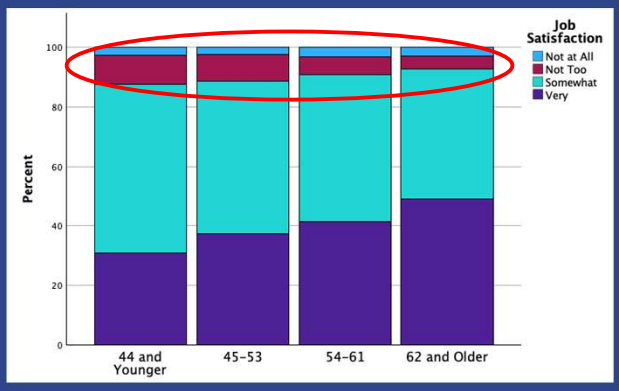
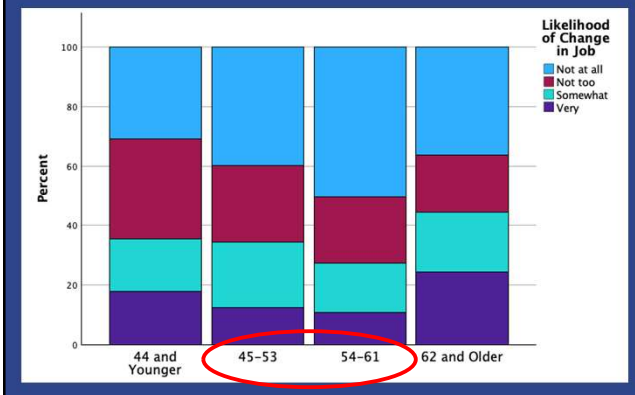
## Personal Job Outlook: By Age Groups




13

## Personal Job Outlook: By Age Groups







14

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| Factors Influencing Career Decisions (i.e., maintain or change jobs) | Overall Mean (SD) (n=1003) | Age Groups (Split Statistically) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | <45 (n=261) | 45-53 (n=247) | 54-61 (n=269) | >61 (n=226) |
| Salary or Income | 3.2 (1.0) | **3.4 (0.8)** | **3.3 (0.9)** | 3.1 (0.9) | 2.8 (1.1) |
| Family or Personal Life | 3.1 (1.0) | **3.4 (0.8)** | **3.2 (0.9)** | 3.1 (0.9) | 2.8 (1.1) |
| Financial Health | 3.1 (1.0) | **3.3 (0.8)** | **3.2 (0.9)** | 3.1 (0.9) | 2.8 (1.1) |
| Administrative/Supervisor Support | 3.1 (1.0) | **3.2 (0.8)** | 3.1 (0.9) | 3.0 (1.0) | 2.8 (1.2) |
| Physical Health | 3.1 (0.9) | 3.1 (0.9) | 3.1 (0.9) | 3.1 (1.0) | 2.9 (1.0) |
| Culture and Climate | 3.1 (1.0) | **3.2 (0.8)** | 3.1 (0.9) | 3.1 (1.0) | 2.8 (1.1) |
| Mental Health | 3.0 (1.0) | **3.2 (0.9)** | **3.1 (0.9)** | 3.0 (1.0) | 2.6 (1.1) |
| Employee Benefits | 2.9 (1.0) | **3.1 (0.9)** | **3.1 (0.9)** | **3.0 (1.0)** | 2.6 (1.2) |
| Coworker Support | 2.9 (1.0) | **3.1 (1.0)** | **3.0 (1.0)** | **3.0 (1.0)** | 2.7 (1.1) |
| Belongingness | 2.8 (1.0) | **2.9 (0.9)** | **2.9 (1.0)** | 2.8 (1.0) | 2.6 (1.1) |
| Training Opportunities | 2.2 (1.0) | **2.5 (1.0)** | **2.4 (1.0)** | 2.1 (1.0) | 1.9 (1.0) |
| Advancement/Leadership Opportunities | 2.2 (1.0) | **2.4 (1.0)** | **2.4 (1.0)** | 2.0 (1.0) | 1.7 (0.9) |

Each Factor Rated: 1 = No Influence; 2 = Low Influence; 3 = Moderate Influence; 4 = Significant Influence

15

## Over the Past 2-3 Years, to What Extent Have You Engaged in Activities Related to Your Sonography Career?

| | Not Much or A Little | Somewhat | Much or A Great Deal |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sincerely Thought about Personal Values, Interests, Abilities, and Weaknesses** | 19.7% | 20.7% | **59.7%** |
| **Voluntarily Participated in Education or Training to Support Career** | 30.4% | 26.0% | **42.6%** |
| **Cared for the Development of Career** | 32.6% | 27.1% | **40.4%** |
| **Undertook Things to Achieve Career Goals** | **38.3%** | 26.2% | 35.5% |
| **Established or Maintained Professional Contacts** | **38.6%** | 28.1% | 33.2% |
| **Developed Plans and Goals for Future Career** | **39.1%** | 26.3% | 34.6% |
| **Assumed Duties or Positions to Progress Professionally** | **42.2%** | 22.6% | 35.3% |
| **Actively Sought to Design a Professional Future** | **48.6%** | 22.6% | 28.9% |
| **Collected Information about Employers, Professional Development, or Job Market** | **50.5%** | 23.4% | 26.1% |

Not Much — A Little — Somewhat — Much — A Great Deal

16

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## Narrative Career Trajectory Questions

Q1. Discuss how your work in sonography was fulfilling and made you feel good about your career:
- **Explore areas of practice and career that help individuals feel good about their work.**

Q2. Relate significant challenges or barriers to career advancement that you have faced in your career:
- **Identify the most common impediments to career advancement and success.**

Q3. Talk about a time when your career development was facilitated or supported to ensure your success:
- **Identify workplace colleagues or processes that are enablers for career advancement.**

Q4. Tell a story of a time when you made a change in your career in sonography-related work:
- **Identify situations or developments that promoted or led to a career or workplace change.**

Q5. Provide additional comments about career opportunities, engagement, or other career and job choices:
- **Critically explore what participants thought were logical next steps or other ways of considering career advancement in the profession**

17

## Survey and Career Response Analysis




- Qualitative coding, analysis, and thematics were completed using a grounded theory approach.
- Jackson, et al., provided structure to the coding process and suggested these archetypes:
  - **Achiever:** ***Enthusiastic and excited about current and future events.***
  - **Striver:** ***Expressing that they want to be successful.***
  - **Contented:** ***Satisfied and content where they are in their work.***
  - **Over it:** ***Feel constrained by the organization but lack energy to act.***

*(Jackson, et al., 2020)*

18

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## Coding Scheme Based on Jackson et. al.

- Each respondent's comments were reviewed by two independent reviewers and codes from this matrix were applied.
- Those disagreements between reviewers were finalized by an independent reviewer (judge) and the final code applied.
- A spreadsheet with all the respondents' comments was compiled for review per question and by participant. This allowed for a final assessment of consistency and locating comments such as "see above."



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19




20

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## Discuss how your work in sonography was fulfilling and made you feel good about your career (N= 417):

- Achiever (work)=74
- Achiever (personal)=19
- Striver (work)= 11
- Striver (personal)=1
- Contented (work)=216
- Contented (personal)=72
- Over it (work)=11
- Over it (personal)=13

**Content (work):** "Being a teacher is super fulfilling. Also, when I found anomalies as a perinatal sonographer."

**Content (work):** "I get a feeling of fulfillment from helping patients. I appreciate the contribution I can make helping patients to receive high-quality health care."

**Achiever (work):** "Numerous times I've found cancers or life-threatening conditions in people who were able to be treated and survive. They make me feel good about my career. I am making a difference in people's lives."

***Theme: Caring for patients and solving complex problems***

21

## Discuss how your work in sonography was fulfilling and made you feel good about your career:

- Contentment centered on the excitement of caring for patients and solving complex problems.
- Building a lasting career may be augmented by these suggestions:
  - Sharing the "case of the week"
  - Posting positive comments provided by patients in the work room
  - Picking a complex issue and working as a team for QI
  - What are other ideas that we can add?
- Being content and comfortable is very important but it also is important to also feel challenged and supported.



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22

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## Relate significant challenges or barriers to career advancement that you have faced in your career (N=329):

- Achiever (work)=11
- Achiever (personal)=0
- Striver (work) =14
- Striver (personal)=1
- Contented (work)=59
- Contented (personal)=12
- Over it (work)=215
- Over it (personal)=17

**Over it (work):** "The hospital I am employed by has gone bankrupt and therefore, much stress about my future with them. I have been injured at work and that adds significant amount of stress and challenge to the situation."

**Over it (work):** "Leadership at my previous job was toxic. To maintain control and limit advancement, they micromanaged and did not include middle management decision making."

**Content (personal):** "I took this job for several reasons. I needed job security and the benefits to support my family in a location that was close to home.

***Theme: Lack of personal support and a toxic work environment***

23

## Relate significant challenges or barriers to career advancement that you have faced in your career:



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Highly trained sonographer who expressed being "over it" may be due to several factors:

- Workplace injury
- Feeling unappreciated
- A lack of personal and workplace resources

Not wanting to leave the profession or escaping a toxic work environment are difficult decisions. Here are some solutions:

- Providing a safe space for honest dialogue
- Recommending a visit with the institution's occupational medicine provider
- Demonstrating compassion for them, just as we do for our patients.

It may be in a co-worker's best interest to leave, but it is important to provide honest and sincere assistance.

24

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## Talk about a time when your career development was facilitated or supported to ensure your success (N=274):

Achiever (work)=84
Achiever (personal)=16
Striver (work) = 9
Striver (personal)=0
Contented (work)=98
Contented (personal)=10
Over it (work)=56
Over it (personal)=1

**Content (work):** "My administration has long been supportive of continuing education."

**Content (work):** Recently accepted a position at a level I trauma hospital and am learning new things."

**Achiever (work):** "I traveled to an amazing, supportive training-oriented facility. Now I'm on staff there!"

***Theme: Physicians and administrators were positive influencers for my career***

25

## Talk about a time when your career development was facilitated or supported to ensure your success:



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- Every sonographer needs to have a great working relationship with their interpreting physician and some benefits are:
  - Setting and achieving personal and occupational goals
  - Discussing new technology or improving exam protocols
  - Sharing content from a national or international meeting
  - Comfort in reviewing a complex clinical case
- Fostering natural relationships is important, but it might need to include physicians or leaders OUTSIDE the lab.
  - *Let's make sure we are occupational matchmakers.*

26

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## Tell a story of a time when you made a change in your career in sonography-related work (N=348):

- Achiever (work)=48
- Achiever (personal)=7
- Striver (work) = 9
- Striver (personal)=3
- Contented (work)=173
- Contented (personal)=37
- Over it (work)=51
- Over it (personal)=20

**Content (work):** " When a full-time overnight position opened on the weekends, I advanced my financial gains with three differentials in pay."

**Content (work):** "I took on supply management responsibilities and department supply/cabinet reorganization to help with additional downtime from scanning."

***Theme: Career change due to physical or mental stress in the workplace***

27

## Tell a story of a time when you made a change in your career in sonography-related work:

- Be aware of co-workers who express feelings of physical and mental stress, how should we respond?
  - Provide support and genuine concern for their safety and well-being
  - Mental and physical stress can be due to the previous difficult patient, or a strong interaction that was perceived as hurtful.
  - Offer a co-worker a break, trade patient assignments, or just provide active listening
  - Provide opportunities for alternative workplace duties that provide a clinical break and provide professional growth.



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28

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## Please provide any additional comments about career opportunities, engagement, or other career and job choices within sonography (N=213):

- Achiever (work)=11
- Achiever (personal)=2
- Striver (work) =81
- Striver (personal)=5
- Contented (work)=51
- Contented (personal)=14
- Over it (work)=49
- Over it (personal)=0

- **Striver (work):** "I could have easily gone elsewhere but choose to stay in our lab which is highly ranked due to the science, cutting edge, and opportunities that we offer patients and that is important to me."
- **Striver (work):** "I find that even after so many years in the field of ultrasound, many still don't understand what it is we do. This is a challenging barrier, especially when administrators just look at the numbers."

***Theme: An expressed need for more support and career options***

29

## Please provide any additional comments about career opportunities, engagement, or other career and job choices within sonography:



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- All our colleagues want career advancement but how to get there is both personal and often difficult to navigate. Here are some suggestions:
  - Foster collaborative ways to address workplace injuries
  - Strive to be part of a world class imaging laboratory.
  - Establish a mentoring program to help co-workers, students, and our selves achieve success
  - Form a local study group that is a balance of encouragement and educational content
- Working with someone, a group, or even asking for outside assistance is a huge step in moving forward along a chosen career path.

30

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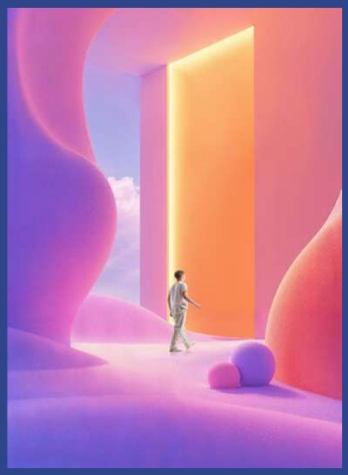
## Overview of Findings

- Many respondents reported a degree of contentment, which could be interpreted as satisfaction with their work successes.
- A large number of respondents indicated a need for future growth. They are either unwilling to continue working under poor conditions or striving to be more successful in their role within the field.
- These responses are unique to our survey respondents; still, they indicate a need to cultivate and inspire sonographers, from novice to expert.
- What have you experienced? What has worked at your facility? Please use the card to jot down more ideas!



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31

## Career Advancement and Retention: Fostering Satisfaction



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- You may agree or disagree with our findings, depending on your unique work environment and situation.
- It is important to be informed by this work and to consider how educators, managers, and staff can foster workplace satisfaction and sonographer success:
  - Provide a safe and healthy work environment, especially for those who feel this is an area for improvement.
  - Review workplace policies and address any important elements or updates.

32

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## Career Advancement and Retention: Self-Assessment & Communication

- It may be important to provide managers with an annual self-assessment that allows for discussing goals and objectives, which fosters greater career success.
- It is less intimidating to talk with co-workers about challenging issues –you are not the only one!
- The quote, "safety in numbers" means approaching a difficult issue in a group setting or discussion. Monthly staff meetings should allow for this type of activity.



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33

## Career Advancement and Retention: Implications for AI



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- Although not part of this survey, generative AI is impacting our workflow, and our current survey is gathering data on that occupational impact.
- We view AI as a positive impact on workflow, such that measurements and image quality adjustments can be done by AI. This time could be reinvested in:
  - Improved ergonomics
  - Review of prior studies and improved detection of subtle pathologic changes
  - Elevate a sonographer to a quality improvement career position.

34

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## Career Advancement and Retention: Implications for AI



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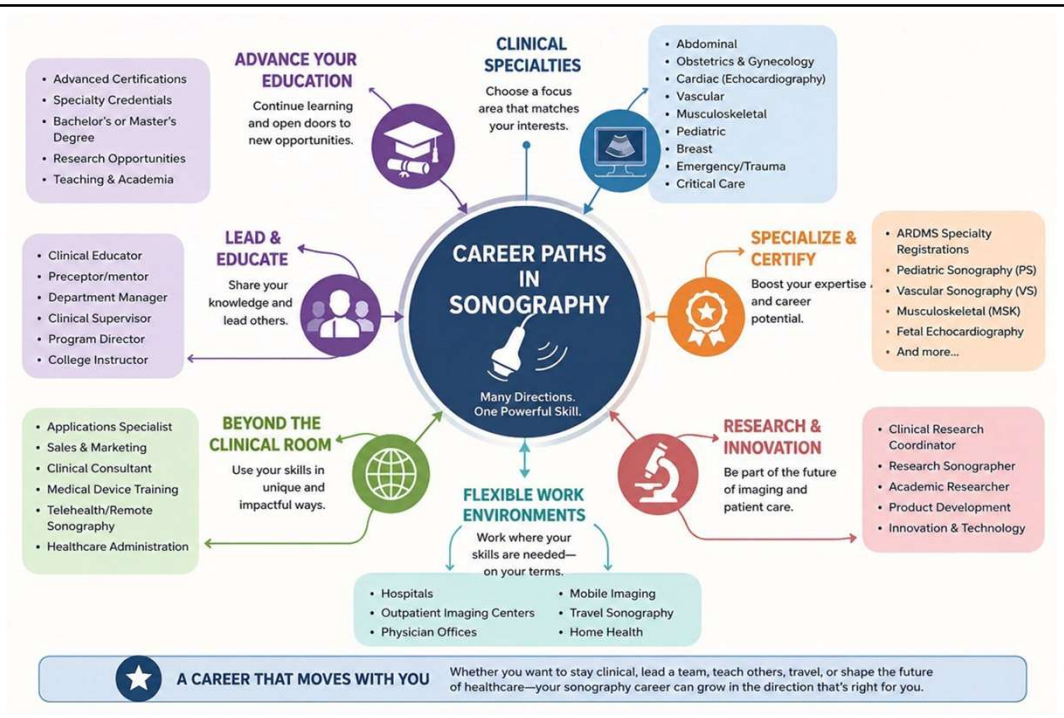
- AI is already an accepted tool in our daily lives, such as GPS, spell check, Alexa, etc.
- AI is also migrating into our workflow, and this is our chance to make sure that it enhances our work and improves patient care.
- The fear of change is a normal human response but, in this case, leveraging AI within the sonography workflow can only be defined by the end user ---SONOGRAPHERS.
- Improved workflow could allow for an investment in both sonographer career advancement and in patient satisfaction.

35

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36

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37

## Summary: United We Scan!



- Steve's moto was, "United We Scan!" That inclusive statement was about being a cohesive and distinct profession.
- We must work to support our entire workforce, students, staff, managers, and *as well as our patients*.
- A career pathway needs to be supported, maintained, and allow each person to achieve what is best for them. These needs and aspirations change over time –it is important to listen and allow for individual growth.
- Steve was never satisfied with his success, he was striving to create a better profession for all of us ---we must be ready to adapt, respond, and grow to meet everyone's needs.

38

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