

Art of Keeping Current: Coding Supervisors Must Meet Today's Deadlines, Prepare for Tomorrow's Changes

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by Chris Dimick

Change is the constant in coding. And while it is a coding supervisor's job to stay current and implement these changes, sometimes just getting the day-to-day coding work accomplished is a challenge.

Staying ahead of the changes can be difficult, but it is important that managers find a way to balance the present with the future, says Ginny Martin, RHIA, CCS, data quality supervisor for SwedishAmerican Hospital in Rockford, IL.

Though she has a very well-trained coding staff, it is still necessary for Martin to lend a hand with coding once in a while. This is common in many facilities, where coding managers have to fill in during busy times or during periods of change. In other facilities, coding is a part of the manager's job.

No matter what the work day brings, Martin understands that her job reaches beyond just that day's concerns. And she knows her department should never miss their goals because of coding changes. "My CFO doesn't care that the changes are coming out October 1," she says. "He expects me to know what they are, be ready for them, and have no change in [productivity]."

Supervisors benefit by physically blocking out time each day to work on future coding changes, Martin says. "I have to make myself take the time in order to handle those daily things," she says. "But I also have to make sure I take the time to know what is coming up."

Martin checks the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and AHIMA Web sites regularly, and she receives several e-mails each day regarding coding changes. She makes sure to review these sources daily in order to stay current. "Knowing what is coming up is half the battle," she says.

Staying ahead of MS-DRGs, POA

Like facilities nationwide, SwedishAmerican Hospital's coding staff faced a challenge last year in implementing required MS-DRGs, POA, and several admit-source definitions by October 1. The implementations, though stressful, went well because the coding staff organized teams to handle the changes well in advance.

Martin gave educational presentations to departments that would be affected by the changes and made sure her staff knew how their jobs would be affected. Staying ahead of the curve starts with keeping up on coding trends. One must also adequately test coding changes within their facility's system to ensure the changes in processes and workflow operate properly prior to go-live, Martin says.

Educating the coding staff on changes early is vital, agrees Tina Schumacher, RHIA, former coding supervisor at Cincinnati VA Medical Center in Cincinnati, OH. VA coding staff handle a wide variety of patient types from inpatient and outpatient to primary care and home-based services. Staying current in the midst of all those different coding requirements can be overwhelming, Schumacher says. The key is planning.

"The most difficult for me is the timing of when to train on the new guidelines and rules, so that my coders will be ready when the changes are implemented and yet not overwhelm them at the same time," she says. Developing good workflow processes at the ground level will make implementing changes easier, Schumacher says. "By keeping up with this and having this process already in place, I can quickly address any issues on a daily basis to ensure we stay up to date," she says.

Attending coding seminars is another way for supervisors to stay current. In order to prepare for the MS-DRG and POA changes last year, Schumacher attended an AHIMA coding seminar in Las Vegas that rolled out in-depth discussions on

changes, as well as other hot topics. The information she obtained at the seminar she brought back to her coding staff.

One tip was to forget what she knew about MS-DRGs. Old knowledge of certain codes no longer applied. "I knew DRGs kind of like the back of my hand, and then they changed, all of them changed," she says. "We are all playing a little bit of catch-up on that. I don't know them like I used to."

"But things like that happen, and if you know about them ahead of time and you try to plan as much as you can, then I don't think you have that problem."

Direct staff communication is also necessary, since it is the coders who will be applying these changes. Get each coder's input on the best way to implement new changes, Schumacher says. They are the ones doing the day-to-day work, and usually have creative solutions no manager would think of. "I think the more that you can gain from them, and the more effort that you get from them, really helps so that you can design your processes accordingly," she says.

The more preparation a coding manager does today, the less stress a coding staff will face tomorrow. "You are prepared for it, and then they are prepared," Schumacher says. "They don't get as anxious about the changes."

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