Asking the Right Questions: Connecting Users and Data Through a Formal Interview Process

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A structured interview process adapted from the library profession offers HIM professionals a model well suited to their emerging roles as data brokers.

For more than 75 years HIM professionals have been charged with the role of record custodian, retrieving health records for a wide variety of requestors. Historically, this key responsibility was accomplished by locating paper records of an individual or a series of patients based on diagnosis, procedure, or provider to support quality improvement, accreditation, and other retrospective review functions. Data retrieval in the 21st century is increasingly complex. Paper records are being replaced by databases and data warehouses, which are accessed using query and data mining techniques.

Facilitating the use of health information is a basic business objective of HIM professionals. The applications of health data are growing in number as well as complexity—health data are requested for patient care, quality evaluation, reimbursement, compliance, utilization management, education, research, funding, and legal proceedings.[1] Therefore requestors of these data come from many different disciplines and possess varying familiarity with HIM.

For these reasons, as HIM professionals move from record management to more complex information management in the evolving e-HIM™ environment, they benefit from adopting a more structured interview process with information requestors. Based on the classic reference interview used by public and medical librarians, the health information services interview (HISI) provides a model well suited to HIM's emerging data broker functions. It also applies during the transition in retrieval skills and customer service from the traditional to the customer-centric environment of the future.

HIM and the Library Profession

Early medical record practice was significantly influenced by the library profession. AHIMA's history began with a request by the American College of Surgeons that Grace Whiting Myers, librarian emeritus of Massachusetts General Hospital, form a group of librarians to create standards for the medical record. With the continued encouragement of the college, the Association of Record Librarians of North America was founded in 1928, with Myers as the first president.

Subsequently, the name of the association and the titles of the credentials evolved into health information management, but the profession retains its connection to library practice. Adapting the library reference interview supports quality information retrieval and customer service as the HIM profession takes the next step into e-HIM.

The Library Reference Interview

The late 19th century saw the rise of professions in the United States, including librarianship with the founding of the American Library Association in 1876. The reference interview, first described in volume 1 of Library Journal that same year, is a fundamental of library education and remains a core skill used to meet the information needs of library patrons.[2]

The interview reflects professional values that emphasize customer service and freedom of access to information. Focus is placed on human relationships between patron and librarian through the communication skills necessary to complete an effective information transaction. The reference interview "attempts to translate the needs of the patron (as articulated, often in ordinary language) into the language and structure of the library."[3]

The reference interview is the subject of substantial scholarship and debate. It continues to evolve, yet it maintains the goal of providing the most complete information to answer a patron's specific request. Several common themes and a variety of interview styles and steps form the foundation for the core concepts and interview steps briefly described below in this aggregate model:

- Core Concepts
    - **The role of the librarian.** Maintain objectivity about both patrons and the information requested; do not rely on personal attitudes or knowledge.
    - **Communication and conversation.** Employ verbal and nonverbal skills that support communication. The interview is a conversation rather than an interrogation.
    - **The process.** Use open-ended questions; conduct the search as a cyclical process with some overlapping steps.
- The Interview Steps
    1. **Set the tone.** Connect with the patron. Create a receptive environment indicating a willingness to be of service.
    2. **Determine the question.** Focus on attentiveness and patience until the patron fully describes the question.
    3. **Ascertain the patron's real need.** Clarify the patron's true question, often called "question negotiation." Acknowledge that patrons are often entering unfamiliar territory.
    4. **Devise a search strategy.** Identify key words and concepts, browse for index terms, and explore basic terminology. Match the question with sources most likely to answer the question and meet the patron's needs.
    5. **Retrieve and evaluate information.** Return information to the patron with sufficient clarity and explanation to promote understanding of the results. Cite sources.
    6. **Offer closure.** Ask, "Have I completely answered your question?" This classic closure ensures that the patron's intended question is answered.
    7. **Follow up.** Confirm that the patron is satisfied.

The Health Information Services Interview

Similar to the library reference interview, the HISI is a framework of the essential elements of a successful interview. William Katz, author of the leading library reference text, notes, "Many consider the reference interview an art form with each situation requiring different types of questions, responses, and interactions."[4] HIM professionals will also find that the interview needs to be tailored to the user, setting, and time frame.

The fundamental concepts of the HISI are detailed in "HISI Core Concepts"; the interview method is detailed in "Seven Steps in the HISI Process". Both parallel those of the library interview, with the HIM professional translating the request into the language and structure of healthcare data. The HISI model uses a mnemonic of seven Cs to aid memory retention of the steps.

The main difference between the library reference interview model and the HISI model is the gatekeeper function. HIM professionals have the dual responsibilities of facilitating information use by authorized requestors and protecting confidential information from unauthorized users. If an HIM professional declines a request based on privacy restrictions, an explanation should be given, including what authorizations may be required. The user should be asked, "Have I completely explained our privacy policies?" to ensure that the reason for the denial is understood.

As data use increases, HIM professionals have the opportunity to adopt the following emerging roles: health information manager in an integrated delivery system, clinical data specialist, patient information coordinator, data quality manager, data resource administrator, research and decision support analyst, and security officer.[5] HIM professionals also serve as compliance officers and privacy officers. These roles all involve information broker functions that can incorporate the HISI systematic inquiry process as a core competency.

In addition to practitioners, educational programs can incorporate the HISI in the essential area of communication skills. Reference interview skills are important to emerging HIM professionals because a key competency of future HIM practice will be “facilitating communication of health information across organizational healthcare teams and between different entities.”[6]

The changing industry challenges HIM professionals to embrace change and reinvent traditional practice by continually transforming their knowledge, skills, and abilities to keep pace. In developing communications and customer service skills, the HISI provides a best-practice model for user-centered information service in the e-HIM future.

HISI Core Concepts

The Role of the HIM Professional

- HIM professionals have equal duties to:
  - provide information rapidly for those who are authorized; and
  - protect information from those not authorized.
- HIM professionals retrieve the information, not answer the query based on personal knowledge.

Conversation and Communication

- The interview is a conversation, not an interrogation.
- Smile, make eye contact, and offer a friendly greeting.
- Speak in a relaxed tone; make attentive comments, give the user your full attention.
- Do not interrupt users or attempt to finish their sentences for them.
- Paraphrase or repeat to demonstrate understanding.
- Avoid giving premature answers.
- Neutral questioning avoids premature diagnosis of information needs.
- Avoid use of excessive jargon.
- Use medical terminology at an appropriate level.

The Process

- Use open-ended questions to obtain a more detailed reply.
- Use closed or clarifying questions to refine the search question.
- Remember that often the information the user brings to the interview may be incomplete or inaccurate.
- The process is not clear-cut. It is iterative, with some steps overlapping or occurring simultaneously. Keep the user informed of the search progress, which helps avoid any sense of abandonment.

Core concepts of the HISI stress professional duties, quality communication, and an open-ended and iterative process. The interview contains seven steps that translate the request into the language and structure of healthcare data.

Seven Steps in the HISI Process

1. **Cordiality**
   - Create a receptive environment, emphasizing customer service.
2. **Confidentiality (HIPAA)**

- User makes request.
- Is it an internal or external user?
- Establish that the user has both the "authority to know" as well as the "need to know."
- Is the information requested individually identifiable or aggregate data?
- Is protected health information or provider identification requested?
- Is research or the institutional review board involved?
- If it is necessary to decline the request, provide an explanation and proceed to step 6, asking, "Have I completely explained our privacy policies?"

3. **Clarification of the Client's Real Need**
   - Try to clarify the user's question as specifically as possible.
   - Do not prematurely diagnose the request.
   - What kind of material is needed (e.g., primary or secondary records, reports, print or electronic files)?
   - In what context is the information to be used?
   - What degree of complexity is required?
   - How much information is needed?
   - Are coded data needed? If so, which classification systems and which code ranges?
   - Is there a time constraint or deadline?
   - Summarize or restate the request to the user.

4. **Construction of a Search Strategy**
   - Identify key words, concepts, and codes; browse for index terms; explore basic terminology.
   - Match the question with sources most likely to answer the question at the complexity of the user's needs.

5. **Content Retrieval and Evaluation**
   - Keep the user informed of search progress.
   - Explain steps taken in search.
   - Write down search strategy.
   - Assess user understanding.
   - Assist user in determining relevancy and reliability.

6. **Closure**
   - Refer the user to other places if appropriate information cannot be found (e.g., registry, state agencies).
   - Ask the user if you have sufficiently answered the question. The classic closure is "Have I completely answered your question?"
   - Assure user you can be asked for more assistance.

7. **Confirmation and Follow-Up**
   - Ask user questions such as "Did that help you?" or "Did you find what you needed?

Notes

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