

Breaking Down Barriers, Boosting Visibility: How to Move Beyond the HIM Department

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by Joan Beguelin, RHIA

Does your job lack challenges or underuse your skills? Taking a closer look at the barriers to your success will reveal the first steps to overcoming them.

Increasing HIM professionals' visibility and credibility in healthcare organizations is a common concern as we try to showcase our skills outside the HIM department. However, sometimes the barriers to a leadership role or a more challenging position seem insurmountable. This article will help you hurdle these obstacles and create a roadmap to success.

What Are Your Barriers to Change?

Many obstacles to change often exist in our own minds. To gain visibility and credibility requires developing action plans. These plans will help transform a wish into a reality. The first part of the action plan is identifying the real or perceived barriers that hold you back. Some statements HIM professionals have used to describe these barriers include:

- I lack the energy to affect change
- My employer is not aware of my unique knowledge and skills
- I don't have a master's degree
- It's too late in my career to learn new skills
- I'm afraid of change
- My progress is hindered by a glass ceiling
- People don't listen to me or don't respect me

Take Control

There is no question that change requires energy. Before being concerned about the energy it takes to change, start by analyzing why the current position is draining your energy. Some of the reasons that a job can fatigue an employee are a lack of challenge, no sense of accomplishment, doing the same tasks repeatedly, and a lack of self-awareness.

Lack of challenge usually develops because you perform a familiar, comfortable job. After a while, you may begin to believe there is no way to move upward. However, your job need not feel like a daily chore. There are alternatives to any situation if you look for them. One sure way to energize yourself is to develop a plan and take control of your situation.

Spotlight Your Skills

If your employer does not know about your unique knowledge and skills, it is important to educate him or her. First, schedule a meeting with your immediate supervisor to discuss your concerns about being undervalued or underutilized. Consider putting together a one to two-page analysis of the skills you possess that you feel aren't recognized. This might include a course outline from your alma mater that demonstrates the general management skills and specialized training you received during your HIM education. Then, provide a copy of the analysis to your supervisor and cover the essential points during the meeting.

Come to the meeting prepared to discuss a current or future project for which you would like to volunteer. Your goal is to make it easy for your supervisor to agree to your request for greater involvement in activities outside the HIM department. Before meeting with your supervisor, make contact with the leader of the project you are interested in and get his or her support.

Then, if your supervisor communicates with that team leader, he or she will be aware of your interest and likely reinforce the value you would bring to the team.

Explore an Advanced Degree

Many organizations require a department director to have a master's degree to make the leap to a more senior management position. First, determine if this standard exists in your organization before pursuing a degree. As we know, members of the senior management team are responsible for shaping the mission, vision, and values of an organization. They also develop the strategies that move the organization towards its defined goals. Similarly, a master's curriculum includes courses on thinking more globally about an organization and the interaction between finance, human resources, and operations. Fortunately, the training you received in your HIM education provides a strong foundation for the master's curriculum. Explore one of the many distance learning programs that can be taken at your own pace. In addition to the skills you'll obtain, starting these classes will show your peers and superiors that you are serious about an advanced degree.

Many companies have a standard career track toward the CEO position. In healthcare, CEOs frequently come from nursing or through the chief operating officer position. Because of the proliferation of master's programs, an increasing number of department directors are getting master's degrees in management to help them reach these positions. However, it is important to decide for yourself if the purpose of the advanced degree is to qualify you for a vice president-type position or to be heard and appreciated for your management skills. The latter form of recognition will help you ensure that your department is able to get the resources it needs.

Use Your Strengths

You can learn new skills at any stage of your career. While any change involves a learning curve, it's part of the thrill of a new professional challenge. The goal is to find a project or position that taps into your interests and innate strengths. Your confidence in your knowledge and abilities is central to the whole process of career success. HIM professionals have an impressive array of distinctive skills and knowledge. Believing in these skills puts you leagues ahead of others.

Change is never easy. Leaving a comfortable position for the unknown takes courage and requires some serious soul searching, but don't allow insecurities to stop you. If fear of change is keeping you from pursuing new horizons, focus on your capabilities instead of what you see holding you back. The HIM curriculum includes the principles of law as applied to the health field, the collection, presentation, and analysis of data, research methods, and the application of planning and organizing to the health information setting. This curriculum provides basic management skills and positions you for a broad range of management opportunities.

Break through the Glass Ceiling

Because the majority of HIM professionals are women, it's important to be aware of the potential for a glass ceiling in your organization. If you encounter this barrier, take two important steps. First, identify an individual within your facility who has successfully advanced in his or her career. How was this accomplished? What specific set of characteristics does this individual possess that have contributed to success? It may be a skill set, personality, or level of intelligence. An analysis of another person's career path may provide some useful insights as you examine your own career plans.

Second, choose a mentor. A mentor can be very helpful to your career development. Typically, the mentor is a senior manager with broader experience in the organization who has the ability to guide you. A mentor can act as your counselor and provide advice on career paths and opportunities for further development. He or she will be familiar with what is necessary to become a leader in your organization. Obviously, the most important element in such a relationship is a mutual respect between you and your mentor. You'll find that your mentor can be an invaluable source of knowledge.

Promote Yourself

Marketing yourself is critical to a successful, exciting career. If you feel that no one listens to you or you feel shut out of opportunities to lead a project, gain increased responsibilities, or participate in decision making, you may need to do a better job of marketing yourself. Professionals who make themselves visible inside and outside their work places are off to a good start. A willingness to take risks and work hard is vital. Also consider:

- dressing more professionally; emulate your supervisors or the organization's leaders
- volunteering for company-wide task forces
- understanding and embracing the team-building techniques your facility uses
- requesting leadership or other appropriate training
- educating yourself; becoming knowledgeable about the healthcare industry as a whole and quality improvement philosophies
- arriving on time, prepared, and ready to contribute to meetings

Finally, obtain the skills your employer requires of leaders. Professionals who commit to learning will have more choices. All HIM professionals should find ways to expand the scope of their skills, because a person with a wide range of skills is more likely to find new career choices than one with a narrow repertoire. An accurate self-assessment is essential. For example, if you are not computer savvy, take some computer classes. If you have difficulty articulating ideas, take a speech class. Think about your interests and what qualifications are needed to progress. Think about where you want to be in the future so you know what education and training will make those dreams a reality.

No job is perfect. But staying in a position that no longer offers challenges and leaves you feeling trapped benefits neither you nor your employer. Everyone deserves a rewarding and interesting job, and increasing your visibility within your organization is the first step.

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Article citation:

Beguelin, Joan. "Breaking Down Barriers, Boosting Visibility: How to Move Beyond the HIM Department." *Journal of AHIMA* 74, no.5 (May 2003): 51-53.

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