

Bridging the Gap from Student to Employee

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Transitioning from college to the work force in the HIM field can be a difficult process. Many employers mandate a minimum two years experience for open positions, and well-trained but inexperienced new graduates continue to search for opportunities to enter the HIM profession. Interviews with HIM recruiters indicate no shortage of jobs, yet positions remain open for extended periods of time or go unfilled altogether.

However, there is an undeniable learning curve for HIM positions, and hiring officials are justifiably reluctant to hire the inexperienced. HIM professionals recognize this paradox; however, transitional positions are rare in today's world. This article explores ideas that can bridge the gap between school and career.

Entry-level Issues

HIM is a dynamic profession. We recognize the need to grow our work force and have a strategically targeted market. Unfortunately, we have lost the entry-level positions that new graduates traditionally filled. Recruiters and career counselors frequently hear graduates question the value of an education or credential because of this phenomenon. If we trust our own training programs, schools, and credentials, then why do we assume the gap will be insurmountable for a new graduate?

In a recent report titled "Key Drivers of Educational Value: The Emergence of Educational ROI," students report that the three most significant factors when choosing a college are:

- Opportunities the college provides for internships
- Quality of the career placement services
- Job placement rates

We have the power to offer experience through internships and mentoring. Education and credentialing provide reliable knowledge foundations. Planned internships and mentoring can refine the skills employers seek. They also offer ideal opportunities to hire based on demonstrated ability and aptitude.

Where Are We Now?

A 2005 AHIMA House of Delegates resolution challenged HIM professionals to enhance their efforts to provide clinical education to HIM students and to employ recent HIM graduates by creating entry-level opportunities (see the August 2005 issue of *AHIMA Advantage*). Much has been accomplished in the two years since that resolution, but we are not there yet.

Perry Ellie, MA, RHIA, FAHIMA, president of H.I.M. Recruiters and one of the principle authors of the resolution, finds that more needs to be done. "Several component state associations, employers, educational programs, and the students themselves have taken the resolution to heart and are striving to bridge the gap," he says. "However, we continue to receive urgent job requests from recent grads seeking that first career opportunity. I implore all parties to continue to give this issue a high priority. The future of our educational programs and profession is based upon our graduates starting their careers as positively as possible."

Types of Career Explorations

Career exploration takes a variety of shapes and expectations, but for purposes of this article the following definitions apply:

- **Job shadowing**-an individual interested in learning more about the profession contacts an HIM practitioner and requests a visit to better understand the day-to-day job functions. Typically, a visit lasts from several hours to several days. This is often the first contact a student has with a professional in the field.

- **Practica**-a component of an academic program (for credit) in which the student is assigned to work at a healthcare location with a set of objectives to fulfill. The intent is to incorporate classroom theory with real-world application. The Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education refers to this as professional practice experience and requires a formal agreement between the provider and the academic program. These sessions last from a couple of days to a month.
- **Internships** (noncredit) can be paid or nonpaid and typically attract the rising senior or recent graduate. A popular industry model is a 10-week paid internship that occurs in the summer, with most interns making \$300–\$500 a week on an intern stipend. Internships help bridge the gap from education to employment by providing valuable real-world experience on the student's resumé. Often students report that their internships lead to job offers or to a valuable industry contact that will lead to future jobs.

Job Shadowing

To make informed decisions about career options, one needs a window into that world. In a field as diverse as HIM, a brochure or Web site cannot provide enough substance. One method to achieve this goal is job shadowing. The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory defines job shadowing as offering an opportunity for an individual to learn about a job by walking through the work day as a shadow to a competent worker.

Job shadowing is a way for interested individuals to witness the work environment firsthand. Job shadowing should not be confused with professional practice experience or internships. Job shadowing is career awareness, limited to observation only. Career-specific skills are not transferred. The purpose is simple: introduce interested candidates to the world of HIM in that particular institution. The intent is to bring curricula and career brochures to life.

Some school programs require an applicant to conduct an informational interview with a practitioner prior to accepting a student into the program. Katherine Hansen, a credentialed career master, recommends using school alumni as a source for shadowing opportunities. This lends itself to the networked HIM community and can be a good place to begin.

HIM mentors can easily provide a slice of real life without giving access to privileged information. Consider what would provide a day-in-the-life view of your routine. Keep in mind, the person shadowing has very little understanding of the HIM profession. Provide an end-of-the-day summary wrap-up by discussing issues like:

- What drew you to this career?
- What would you like to do after graduation?
- How does what you saw today differ from your expectations?

Professional Practice Experience

Those of us who are credentialed as an RHIT or RHIA were guided through one or more professional practice experiences when we were students. Guided field experience is so important to the profession that it is one of the items in the AHIMA Code of Ethics. Fulfilling this debt of obligation to the profession is the hallmark of a professional.

Internships-A 2007 Priority

Internships are relatively new for HIM but are widely and effectively used in many other professions. The experience is universally accepted as mutually beneficial. Internships allow employers a chance to see a potential new hire in more realistic settings and to examine such skills as team building, initiative, and working under deadline.

These are valuable attributes that are unlikely to be determined in a traditional job interview experience. As the benefits of internships become more evident in HIM, we will need to develop paid opportunities as many of today's students are adult learners who will need the financial support of a paid internship.

Component state associations can launch campaigns to provide \$500 internship grants for HIM students. Healthcare employers can offer sponsored internships at an hourly rate. School programs can contact their alumni to seek donations for internship grants. These types of opportunities have unlimited potential.

The key is to launch awareness at multiple levels: practitioner, academic, and professional association. In January AHIMA launched a series of part-time paid internships for HIM seniors to work with the professional practice staff. Across the country, many practitioners have opened their department doors to help new graduates make the transition. It has made a difference in the careers of those fortunate recipients.

Respecting Privacy

Without question, maintaining the privacy of health information presents a challenge to this initiative. It is vital to recognize that the professional privacy and integrity we represent can be comfortably protected while students are engaged in professional practice experiences.

Privacy concerns need not impede nor abort HIM professionals' willingness to provide real-life opportunities to the HIM professionals of the future. Additional AHIMA resources offer specific guidance to assist in providing meaningful experiences while respecting the boundaries of our profession.

Expanding the scope and opportunities of job shadowing visits, professional practice experiences, and internships serves the interests of both higher education and the healthcare industry. By encouraging and welcoming new graduates, we ensure a well-trained work force to fill current job openings and satisfy future needs. Will you help bridge the gap?

References

Eduventures Learning Collaborative Program in Enrollment Management. "Key Drivers of Educational Value: The Emergence of Educational ROI." More information about Eduventures is available on the company's Web site at <http://www.eduventures.com>.

Finnigan, Dan, and Marc Karasu. *Your Next Move, Success Strategies for Midcareer Professionals*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2006.

Hansen, Katharine. "Research Companies and Careers through Job Shadowing." Available online at http://www.quintcareers.com/job_shadowing.html.

"House Resolution: Increase Dialogue, Employment Opportunities." *AHIMA Advantage* 9, no. 5 (August 2005): 1.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. "Job Shadowing." Available online at <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/stw/sw3jobsh.htm>.

Vogt, Peter. "You Can Get Paid for an Unpaid Internship." Available online at <http://content.monstertrak.monster.com/resources/archive/internships/unpaid/>.

Career Resources Available in the BoK

AHIMA provides a number of articles assisting students in their internships or job shadowing. Among them are:

- Hjort, Beth. "Protecting Confidentiality in Healthcare Education Programs." *Journal of AHIMA* 74, no. 8 (September 2003): 64A–D.
- AHIMA Privacy and Security Practice Council. "Job Shadowing and the HIPAA Privacy Rule." *Journal of AHIMA* 77, no. 8 (September 2006): 69, 71.

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