

# Career Trailblazers: HIM Opportunities for Entrepreneurs

Save to myBoK

by Dayna Pierzchala, MPA, RHIA, and Michelle Dougherty, RHIA, CHP

*HIM offers plenty of opportunities for self-starters. There is no single path to business ownership, but successful entrepreneurs share common character traits, and their paths trace a progression from expertise to ownership.*

The diversity of the HIM field offers unlimited possibilities for professionals looking to start their own businesses or capitalize on an opportunity in a particular market niche. Many HIM professionals have chosen the entrepreneur pathway, from sole proprietorship to starting a large corporation. There is no right or wrong career progression for an entrepreneur; the following ladder outlines a common progression that builds on education, credentials, and expertise.

What is an entrepreneur? The following definition, evolved from work done at Harvard Business School, is generally accepted: “Entrepreneurship is the process of creating or seizing an opportunity and pursuing it regardless of the resources currently controlled.”<sup>1</sup>

The HIM field has many niches that turn into business opportunities. Some traditional pathways include operational consulting in a variety of practice settings, coding consulting, release of information, transcription, and interim staffing and management. Professionals have started businesses in less-traveled paths that capitalized on market needs such as HIM recruitment, off-site storage, freelance writing and publishing, and many others. The world of technology opens even more doors for the HIM entrepreneur, as professionals capitalize on industry changes in electronic document management, database management, and a host of other needs.<sup>2</sup>

Often those with the entrepreneurial spirit realize business needs and look for the right time and opportunity. They possess flexibility and the potential to meet personal and financial goals. These individuals generally have more tolerance of risk. To help minimize risk, many professionals grow their business in steps by starting their businesses part-time while keeping a guaranteed salary from an employer. Many professionals seeking flexibility in their work life see owning a business as a way to bring in a healthy income while working part-time; others pursue businesses to supplement their incomes.

Individuals who succeed as entrepreneurs share common characteristics. An analysis of more than 50 studies found a consensus around six general characteristics of entrepreneurs: commitment and determination; leadership; opportunity obsession; tolerance of risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty; creativity, self-reliance, and ability to adapt; and motivation to excel.<sup>3</sup>

The following ladder shows a common progression that begins with gaining expertise and progresses to owning a business. Some people see a niche and seize an opportunity right out of college; others gain expertise over time. The type of business structure chosen—sole proprietorship, small business, or large business or corporation—depends on the business opportunity and the values, goals, and the risk tolerance of the individual.

## How to Read the Ladder

Down the left of the table are listed skills, attributes, and other aspects of entrepreneurship. “Ladder rungs” one to three represent the progression individuals can be expected to make as they advance toward their goal of entrepreneurship. Three versions of the third rung represent three business sizes.

On the first ladder rung, professionals gain the education, credentials, and foundation of knowledge that can be used to leverage a new business opportunity.

On the second rung, they gain expertise and additional knowledge in the business opportunity of choice, preparing for entrepreneurial endeavors. Individuals begin to test their values and goals against different business opportunities to find the

right fit and actively gain exposure for themselves professionally, building their reputation. Networking is critical. This is also a time for the entrepreneur to gain new skills, particularly in business planning, development, marketing, sales, and operations. Some individuals will start their business part-time to explore the opportunity and build a financially sound foundation.

The third rung differs according to the the business model being pursued, so three versions are provided. Each version offers unique opportunities for the HIM professional. The business model pursued is based on the values, goals, and risk tolerance of the entrepreneur and the type of business started. The rung for self-employment represents sole proprietors, with no employees (but they may have subcontractors). The second version is for small business owners with employees. This entrepreneur is involved in a more complex business structure, with special tax issues and benefits. Operationally, this business is more complex to manage than a sole proprietorship. The third version of the third rung is for large businesses with employees.

	<b>Ladder Rung</b>				
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>		
			<b>Self-employment</b>	<b>Small Business</b>	<b>Large Business</b>
<b>Possible Job Titles</b>	HIM professionals in any position can capitalize on a business opportunity. The following are common entrepreneur titles, but they do not comprise an exhaustive list: manager or director, privacy officer, compliance officer, assistant director, coding, transcription or release of information manager, educator, analyst.	At this stage individuals may start anticipating or researching business opportunities and studying business principles. They may stay in their current position, plan for a promotion to gain expertise, or move into a different position such as a marketing associate or sales associate to build new skills.	Sole proprietors may have many titles, such as owner, consultant, and principal.	Titles include owner, CEO, COO, president, vice president, principal, partner, senior consultant.	Titles include owner, CEO, COO, president, vice president, principal, partner, senior consultant.

<b>Education and Credentials</b>	Associate or bachelor's degree preferred. RHIA, RHIT, CCS, CCS-P certification.	Associate or bachelor's degree, depending on the business opportunity. Consider a master's degree to gain new skills and education. Specialized training in sales and marketing if appropriate for the business opportunity being sought. Advanced certification to demonstrate proficiency in an area such as CHP, CHS, CHPS, CPHQ. For coding professionals, CCS or CCS-P is a must at this level. Advanced certification lends professional credibility and communicates a level of expertise to potential clients.	Associate, bachelor's, or master's degree, depending on the business opportunity and market demands. Specialized training in specific field of expertise. Advanced certification to demonstrate proficiency in a given area such as CHP, CHS, CHPS, CPHQ. For coding professionals, CCS or CCS-P is a must at this level. Advanced certification lends professional credibility and communicates a level of expertise to potential clients.	Master's degree. Experience with self-employment plus specialized training in human resources, financial management, strategic planning, and business ownership.	Master's degree. Experience as small business owner plus specialized knowledge of business funding, economic environmental analysis, and corporate structure.
<b>Related Knowledge</b>	Up to three years HIM experience.	Three or more years HIM experience, sales or marketing experience if applicable, information gathering on business development.	Three or more years experience in specific field of expertise.	Five or more years experience in specific industry.	At least 10 years experience in specific or related industry.
<b>Skills</b>	Ability to manage department or departmental functions, if applicable. Ability to think originally about common depart-	Ladder rung one plus: Ability to convince others of the value of a specific service or product. Ability to identify market differen-	Ladder rung two plus: Ability to work independently. Ability to present findings succinctly and professionally. Ability to anticipate needs,	Self-employment skills plus: Ability to manage large volumes of work produced by others. Ability to anticipate markets and react	Small business skills plus: Strategic thinking, business analysis, and ability to move organization forward on growth curve.

	<p>mental issues. Ability to identify new opportunities. Project management. Understanding of applicable regulations, accreditation standards, guidelines, reimbursement rules, laws and professional practice standards, and ability to apply them. Ability to work well with others. Strong communication skills, both written and oral.</p>	<p>tiation strategies. Ability to effectively communicate between customers and producers or developers. Extraordinary product knowledge. Extraordinary knowledge of customer base.</p>	<p>scan the environment, and look for new opportunities. Recognition as expert in field of expertise. Ability to see multiple solutions to a problem and determine the best course of action for the situation. Expertise in and ability to apply regulations, accreditation standards, guidelines, reimbursement rules, laws, and professional practice standards where applicable.</p>	<p>appropriately. Ability to oversee and independently manage multiple aspects of a business simultaneously. High level of general business knowledge. Ability to balance customer satisfaction with production and development needs. Knowledge of tax laws, insurance, sales, and products.</p>	<p>Ability to succinctly present and promote business goals to others to secure financial support. Ability to communicate effectively with customers, employees, and corporate sponsors or stockholders. Ability to represent vision.</p>
<b>Job Duties</b>	<p>Manage all activities relative to an HIM department, specific departmental function, or specialty area such as coding, compliance, quality assurance, and risk management.</p>	<p>Analyze market and market trends. Perform direct and indirect sales functions. Develop marketing materials. Develop relationships and alliances important to business.</p>	<p>Sell and market services. Perform functions agreed upon under contract. Present findings and recommendations. Identify further needs or opportunities.</p>	<p>Sell and market services. Manage all personnel needs as identified by contracts. Manage quality of work performed by personnel. Manage compliance with contractual requirements. Manage client relations. Identify and pursue areas of potential growth. Manage all financial aspects of business.</p>	<p>Oversight of all duties of a small business owner as done through others. Analyze market trends, market opportunities, and develop business strategies. Secure necessary financial backing to fund growth. Implement strategic plan, monitor success, and constantly revise as necessary. Represent the company through professional organizations and strategic alliances to</p>

					promote business.
<b>Salary Ranges*</b>	\$50,000–70,000 (the mean salary for managers is \$60,000). Salary will vary based on position, setting, geography, education, and experience.	Same as ladder rung one.	\$60,000–80,000 (consultants generally make \$12,000 more a year than directors and managers). The average salary range above reflects a full-time consultant. There is no limit to the salary in this category. Many HIM consultants make more than \$100,000 a year.	Highly variable depending on the business opportunity and time commitment. Individuals in this level often make \$80,000 to \$125,000 annually; many over \$100,000 a year.	Highly variable depending on the business opportunity and time commitment. Individuals in this level often make more than \$125,000 annually.
<b>Where to Look</b>	There is no limit to where HIM professionals can gain experience and be exposed to potential business opportunities and niches. Common areas include: acute care hospitals, integrated delivery systems, ambulatory care clinics, surgery centers, physician offices or clinics, long-term care facilities, behavioral health facilities, home health agencies, hospices, veterinary hospitals or clinics, rural health clinics, student health centers, dialysis centers, corporate offices, colleges or universities,	As with the first rung, work setting opportunities are many and varied. Professionals may seek further training in marketing and sales by working for consulting companies or HIM vendors such as those in IT, coding and compliance, transcription, release of information and correspondence, staffing and interim management, and imaging.	Many self-employed HIM professionals are independent consultants. A traditional consulting path is to provide services to healthcare settings (see those listed on the first rung). Some HIM professionals are branching into services for payers and insurers, legal and risk management services, and IT vendors. Consultants may provide services on a variety of topics, such as HIM practices, coding reimbursement, information technology, quality assurance and quality management, HIPAA, regulatory or accreditation standards, legal,	The opportunities for small businesses are endless—a new business can be developed wherever a service is needed. Examples include: coding, compliance and reimbursement (outsourcing, audits, interim staffing, consulting), release of information and correspondence (outsourcing, transcription), database management, EHR (consulting, implementation, software development, sales), imaging and conversion, interim, staffing, off-site storage, MPI conversions, recruitment, microfilming, product sales,	Opportunities for large businesses are available in the healthcare community and other related business communities. Common businesses in this tier include large national consulting and interim management firms and large software developers.

payers or insurance companies.	compliance, risk management, documentation, or cancer registry. Sole proprietors have found other niches beyond consulting, such as interim management and staffing, free-lance writing, dictation service for discharge summaries, sales for a particular product, online education, and course development.	publishing, software development, and franchise opportunities.
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## Out There Building Friendships

**Joy Carroll**, RHIA, juggles a number of responsibilities as founder and president of Data Concepts Digital Imaging. “Basically, my husband and I do all the sales. I do installation and training on the software and hardware, and we comanage the office. I do wear many hats, but love every minute of it,” Carroll says. Before beginning her own business, however, Carroll started off just like many other HIM professionals.

As an HIM student at the Medical College of Georgia, Carroll worked part time as a file clerk and in the physician incomplete record area at University Hospital in Augusta, GA. “That’s where I got a lot of the day-to-day experience I think people need in order to understand what actually goes on in an HIM department,” she says. From there, Carroll was promoted to full-time utilization review coordinator and worked with physicians until she moved to Athens, GA, where she was an assistant director at Athens Regional Hospital.

But it was her move to Memorial Hospital in Chattanooga, TN, and her role as director of medical records that would eventually lead her to embrace the health information technology she now makes her business. “When I first went to Memorial, we started investigating software for a new mainframe system. Later we began looking for an electronic record system, and when it was time to implement the electronic record system, I was definitely a hands-on person.”

As director, learning the new electronic system was an integral part for Carroll. “I wanted to understand the system completely because I didn’t feel I could train my staff and physicians or recognize problem areas if I didn’t understand the software. It was a great opportunity for me, and the working relationship I developed with the IT department was invaluable.”

Memorial’s foray into e-HIMTM sparked Carroll’s new role of entrepreneur. “The experience of being able to head the project from hardware and software selection through installation and implementation to the problem resolution stage of the project gave me the knowledge base I needed to go out on my own,” she says.

Now, with 16 employees, Carroll says she enjoys her clients and contacts the most. “I think the most exciting and rewarding part of my business is we don’t build a client list; we are actually out there building friendships. After all, people do business with people they know and trust.”

*—Meg Featheringham*

## Evolution of an Entrepreneur

“You do a little of everything in a small company,” **Leslie Fox**, MA, RHIA, explains of her role as chief executive officer of Care Communications. Fox has dealt with many changes in the HIM industry since cofounding the company in 1976. Those changes have determined the path her company takes, she says. “It’s not as if we sit in a vacuum here and decide what we want to do,” she explains. “Our clients are calling us and saying, ‘I’ve got this new problem, and can you help us?’”

As a company that offers general HIM consulting and staffing services, Care Communications has evolved with the HIM industry. “In the ’70s, when we started, there was a tremendous demand for help with quality assurance... In the 1980s, when DRGs came along, all of our clients said they needed help with coding... Then in the ’90s, the bigger problems were staffing shortages—shortage of coders, a shortage of cancer registrars.”

Now in the twenty-first century, Fox and her company deal with three lines of business: temporary staffing services, consulting services, and special project work. Her clients’ needs come first. “All of these products and services are done based on conversations with clients and requests from clients.”

Fox began as the director of medical records at Ravenswood Hospital in Chicago. “I think the four-and-a-half years that I was director of the department were invaluable because I had that experience and I have great empathy for HIM directors.” From there she moved on to work with the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations as a program manager, where she was responsible for developing quality assurance methods and training programs.

However, it was the lack of training for what was then called the medical records department on quality assurance that led her and her partners to establish their own business. “We believed that the people in medical records really needed to have more advanced training—in study design, criteria development, data retrieval, and report preparation. They needed to be experts in the whole quality assurance process.”

And 28 years later, Fox still finds the HIM profession exciting. “I have a real passion for our profession, and I find what we do fascinating. I’ve always believed that we could contribute in many different ways and pursue varied and exciting career paths.”

*—Meg Featheringham*

## Drawing on a Wealth of Experience

As president of Sourcecorp-Stat Healthcare Consultants, **Ellen MacDonald**, MPH, RHIA, CCS, has had a wealth of experience to draw from in her career. “I’ve pretty much done it all,” she explains. MacDonald began her career in HIM as a high school sophomore. “I got a part-time job that provided exposure to hospitals and to HIM work. And with the mentoring and encouragement of some of the hospital staff and management, I decided to pursue the field and obtained my credential.”

After college, MacDonald continued climbing the HIM career ladder, becoming director of HIM for a community hospital in Los Angeles. Three short years later, MacDonald began working as a consultant for American Medical International [AMI], a large hospital corporation that owned 120 facilities. “I provided consultation services for the HIM departments as hospitals were acquired and then in establishing standardized work practices and systems in the hospitals. Eventually that grew into a situation where I had about 25 credentialed professionals working for me to provide services for the entire organization.”

MacDonald eventually became a vice president of AMI. When the company was sold and positions were being eliminated and consolidated, she decided to strike out on her own, establishing Stat

Healthcare Consultants, which provides interim management, consulting services, temporary staffing, contract coding, and coding audits to healthcare facilities.

Sourcecorp-Stat Healthcare looks for “credentialed professionals for most of our positions. We do fill some clerical slots or record review positions where the individuals do not have credentials, but they have a medical record background and experience.” With sister Sourcecorp companies ARTS and Lexicode, the three companies employ 265 credentialed professionals. “If we don’t have the staff to fill a position, typically one of the other companies will,” she explains.

MacDonald continues to manage Stat following its acquisition by Sourcecorp in 2001. “As Stat continued to grow and expand, I wanted to make sure that we were able to do all the right things as a company for our employees, primarily.” Affiliation with Sourcecorp has provided benefits for Stat, MacDonald says, explaining, “We provide multiple services in healthcare that allows us to network internally, collaborate on projects, and share resources, and that brings more services and capability together in one company—for the benefit of our clients.”

—Meg Featheringham

## Notes

1. Byers, Tom, et. al. “Characteristics of the Entrepreneur: Social Creatures, Not Solo Heroes.” *In The Handbook of Technology Management*, edited by Richard C. Dorg. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 1998.
2. Raymond, Jacqueline, and Carol Ann Quinsey. “Career Opportunities in Information Technology.” *Journal of AHIMA* 75, no. 8 (2004): 56–62.
3. Byers. “Characteristics of the Entrepreneur.”

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## Acknowledgments

Perry Ellie, MA, RHIA  
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**Dayna Pierzchala** ([daynap@compuserve.com](mailto:daynap@compuserve.com)) is president of Med-TREX, Ltd. **Michelle Dougherty** ([michelle.dougherty@ahima.org](mailto:michelle.dougherty@ahima.org)) is an HIM practice manager at AHIMA.

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