

Climbing the Coding Career Progression Ladder

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Are you wondering what's next in your coding career? There's no shortage of opportunities. AHIMA's Career Progression Ladder for coders shows you how high you can climb.

In today's healthcare environment, coding professionals are enjoying a wealth of opportunity. There is a critical need for qualified coding professionals to classify, manage, and maintain clinical information in a form useful to the industry for analysis or healthcare transactions. And due to increased regulation in healthcare, heightened compliance risks, and progressively more complex reimbursement tied to code assignments, coding professionals have a greater array of choices within the profession than ever before. Plus, along with increased demand for coding professionals is a clear broadening of roles within the HIM profession: coders need knowledge and skills that go beyond the basic conventions of the standard diagnosis and procedure coding systems.

To encourage you to consider what your coding future may hold and how to get there, AHIMA developed the Career Progression Ladder for Clinical Coding Professionals. This ladder was designed with information learned in Vision 2006, the Coding Futures study, data gathered from our membership, and professional literature. It provides information about options across the entire spectrum of clinical coding and details the professional development steps required to reach each level.

A ladder is a good analogy for career development because there is no single "right" rung for every person. Your place on the career ladder is determined by what you want to accomplish. The strong winds of change, however, blow around this ladder, making it necessary to maintain your hold through continuing education and skills assessment and development. And remember, this is only one career ladder within HIM. Our profession offers many career specializations.

Career Progression Ladder for Clinical Coding Professionals

Level One: Coding certificate or on-the-job experience

Educational preparation: High school diploma

- Some type of vocational or certificate training course is recommended and is generally required by most employers
- Some healthcare organizations provide on-the-job training and experience to capable employees with an interest in coding

Salary data: One survey indicated that the greatest percentage of entry-level coders was paid \$10-\$12 per hour or a range of \$20,800-\$24,960, which was consistent with others that displayed salary statistics by experience level.^{[1,2,3](#)} In one survey reviewed, those reporting the coder job title showed a mean salary of close to \$30,099.^{[4](#)}

Job titles: Coder, biller, medical billing specialist, and abstractor.

Where to look for jobs: Any facility providing healthcare services, insurance companies, and medical billing companies. Opportunities exist in hospitals, long-term care facilities, physician offices, ambulatory care facilities, home health agencies, and durable medical equipment providers.

Level Two: Coding certificate or training combined with job experience

Educational preparation: High school diploma

- Coding professionals with experience earn higher compensation according to surveys reviewed
- In fall 2002, AHIMA will provide an entry-level certification examination for a Certified Coding Associate (CCA) credential for coding professionals that have obtained training but lack significant job experience

Salary data: Salary surveys indicate increased compensation for experienced coders. No source was found to provide salary data based on experience only without certification or additional formal education. According to salary surveys, certified coding professionals earn more than non-certified coding professionals.

Job titles: Coder (sometimes with a job class such as I, II, etc.), medical record analyst, health data analyst, medical coder, and clinical coder.

Where to look for jobs: Any facility providing healthcare services particularly in the area of current job experience. Opportunities exist in hospitals, home health agencies, surgical centers, physician offices, rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes, insurance companies, and managed care companies.

Level Three: Specialist credential (CCS and/or CCS-P)**Educational preparation:** High school diploma or higher

- AHIMA recommends two to three years minimum experience before taking the CCS or CCS-P examination
- Many job opening advertisements specify CCS or CCS-P preference
- Many coding professionals obtain multiple credentials, depending on where they work or focus. Consultants often have more than one coding credential.

Salary data: Salary surveys indicate that certification affects compensation. According to one source, salaries for certified coders are nearly \$10,000 more than salaries for non-certified coders.⁵ Another source shows a range of salaries by coding credential from \$41,000-\$48,000 per year.⁶ However, educational, professional, and technical backgrounds were not specified in either survey.

Job titles: Same as above, although some facilities add “certified” to the title when certification is a required qualification. Positions requiring certification for employment often use position titles such as health record coding specialist, medical coding specialist, or health data analyst.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, and government contractors involved with reimbursement.

Level Four: RHIT plus CCS or CCS-P**Educational preparation:** Associate’s degree from an AHIMA-approved HIT program

- Individuals who graduate from an accredited HIT program and earn their RHIT credential generally have entry-level coding training. Obtaining the CCS and/or CCS-P credential illustrates they also have mastery-level coding skills gained through experience
- Health information technicians who wish to focus on a career related to clinical classification and coding find the CCS and CCS-P helpful in obtaining higher-level coding positions

Salary data: Survey data for persons with associate’s degrees show an average salary of more than \$34,000 per year and those with specialist credentials earn from \$2,000-\$7,000 more.⁷

Job titles: For government jobs, the job series is GS-0675, medical record technician, which includes RHIT-qualified individuals. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, rapid job growth is expected for medical records and health information technicians.⁸ RHIT-qualified personnel possess skill sets that go beyond knowledge of coding systems, and therefore are quite valuable as employees for health record processing in a variety of settings.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, and government contractors involved with reimbursement.

Level Five: RHIT plus CCS or CCS-P with added qualifications

- Specialty advancement courses in clinical data management are currently under development by AHIMA to enable the experienced professional to move to a higher level and be qualified for greater responsibility
- Other allied health or business professionals with coding skills may compete for positions, but an HIM education and mastery-level certification provides a competitive edge

Salary data: Varies with job responsibility and skills. Salaries of \$50,000 and more are possible with the right skill set and job performance.

Job titles: Depending on the aptitude of the individual, titles including coding supervisor, clinical data analyst, clinical data supervisor, clinical audit specialist, and clinical data specialist are possible.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, and government contractors involved with reimbursement.

Level Six: RHIA plus CCS or CCS-P

Educational preparation: Bachelor of science degree from an approved HIA program

- AHIMA offers the only certification exam for registry of a health information administrator
- RHIA credentials represent a broad range of competencies in a variety of areas that affect coding systems and processes

Salary data: According to one source, the average salary for RHIAs is more than \$47,000. Another source suggests \$78,000 for an HIM director.⁹ Compensation can exceed six figures for consulting or other positions requiring broad responsibility or high-level expertise.

Job titles: Director of HIM, clinical data manager, chief health information officer, nosologist, or for government position, the job series is GS-0669, medical records administrator.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, and government contractors involved with reimbursement.

Level Seven: RHIA plus CCS or CCS-P with added qualifications

Educational preparation: Bachelor of science degree from an approved HIA program with specialty advancement certificates completed in clinical data management or beginning medical informatics

Salary data: Varies with the position, skills, and other factors, but would be expected to exceed \$50,000 per year.

Job titles: Research assistant, data quality manager, medical research analyst, database administrator, physician practice administrator, compliance officer, director of nosology, director of reimbursement, or coding research manager.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, and government contractors involved with reimbursement.

Level Eight: RHIA plus CCS or CCS-P with master's degree

Educational preparation: Master's degree in HIM or related disciplines such as health services administration or business administration. There are a variety of university or distance learning degree programs available

Salary data: One source indicates nearly \$54,000 as the average salary for individuals with master's degrees.¹⁰ Most colleges and universities require master's degrees for instructors, professors, and program directors.

Job titles: Professor of health information, health information administrator, chief information officer, and many others unique to the position.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, government contractors involved with reimbursement, and colleges and universities.

Level Nine: RHIA plus CCS or CCS-P with master's degree and added qualifications

Educational preparation: Master's degree and completion of specialty advancement program in clinical terminology or medical vocabularies, clinical data management with research focus, or intermediate/advanced medical informatics

- Equally educated professionals in disciplines besides HIM may compete for the same positions at this level

Salary data: One source indicates biostatistics and epidemiology positions may start in the \$65,000 range.^{[11](#)}

Job titles: Epidemiologist, research analyst, statistical analyst, medical informatics associate, clinical data researcher, nosologist, and similar titles.

Where to look for jobs: All healthcare settings, insurance companies, managed care organizations, peer review organizations, government contractors involved with reimbursement, and colleges and universities.

Level Ten: RHIA plus CCS or CCS-P credentials with doctorate degree

Educational preparation: Doctorate degree in HIM or related field. Typical fields of study or affiliation:

- medical informatics
- health information systems
- epidemiology
- nosology
- university research

Salary data: According to one source, epidemiologists and biostatistics positions may start in the \$85,000 range.^{[12](#)} Other positions often exceed six figures, depending on responsibility level and the type of organization.

Job titles: Director of medical informatics, chief information officer, professor, director of epidemiology, director of vital statistics, chief nosologist, or research scientist.

Where to look for jobs: Pharmaceutical companies, public health departments, university research groups, and healthcare-related industry organizations employ these types of individuals.

Leadership positions and professional development opportunities are endless and encompass many different settings and professional practice areas. A recent American Hospital Association study found that 18 percent of surveyed hospitals perceive that there are more job openings than available people.^{[13](#)} AHIMA receives numerous requests from employers on where to look for qualified coding professionals. Physician practice organizations are reporting that one of the top challenges in practice administration is the recruitment and retention of qualified coding professionals. Now is the optimal time to climb the coding career ladder.

The Sky's the Limit

To reach the next rung on this career ladder no matter where you are now, consider the following tips:

- Seek basic coding and clinical information education from a reliable source. A good foundation in clinical knowledge as well as the process of coding is required for advancement. Consider courses in anatomy and physiology, pharmacology, medical terminology, and the disease process so you understand what you read in a medical record. Advancement of clinical knowledge will be helpful all the way to the top of this ladder. Coding systems and medical vocabularies are

expected to become more sophisticated and evolve into electronic data elements and healthcare transaction standards. As a result, a mastery of current coding systems will not be adequate to advance within the profession.

- Become certified. There is no better way to convince a potential employer that you have the skills you say you have.
- Obtain experience in or gain exposure to a different healthcare setting or reimbursement methodology. If you only have experience in one area of coding, seek out opportunities to explore a different healthcare setting through volunteer work. Use the Communities of Practice to monitor key issues in other practice settings. AHIMA has a variety of volunteer committees and task forces that would welcome your participation.
- Use the Internet to expand your knowledge base. The Internet opens the door to a whole new world of information and opportunity. There isn't a single coding position that does not require basic computer use. Access to the Internet enables you to take advantage of the Communities of Practice at any time and provides millions of job listings all over the world.
- Make a commitment to lifelong learning. Successful coding professionals must adapt and adjust to constant changes in the workplace and keep abreast of new technology, clinical treatments, and reimbursement reporting requirements. Participate in continuing education that is widely available from a variety of sources. This is a great way to network with potential employers and see what others are doing with their background and education related to coding.

Take advantage of this information to explore your future in the coding world. There are numerous opportunities available now for qualified professionals and AHIMA is ready to help every step of the way.

Notes

1. "Larger Hospitals Feel Brunt of Coder Shortage." *Medical Records Briefing* 6, no. 2 (February 2001): 9.
2. "How Does Certification Affect Your Value as a Coder: AAPC Salary Survey." American Academy of Professional Coders. Available online at www.aapcnatl.org/recognition/salary.htm.
3. "Survey Shows Disappointing Inpatient Coder's Salaries." HP3 Research Institute National Inpatient Coder Survey. Available online at www.justcoding.com/view.php?topic=career&page=071000a.
4. Advance for HIM 2000 Salary Survey Results. Available online at www.advanceforhim.com/hiss.html.
5. "How Does Certification Affect Your Value as a Coder: AAPC Salary Survey." Available at www.aapcnatl.org/recognition/salary.htm.
6. Advance for HIM 2000 Salary Survey Results.
7. Ibid.
8. US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook: Medical Records and Health Information Technicians. Available online at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos103.htm.
9. Advance for HIM 2000 Salary Survey Results.
10. Ibid.
11. American Statistical Association: Biostatistics. Available online at www.amstat.org/careers/copss/biostatistics.html.
12. Ibid.
13. "American Hospital Association Workforce Data Fact Sheet." Available online at www.aha.org/workforce/resources/FactSheetB0605.asp.
14. "AHIMA Establishes Approval Criteria for Coding Certificate Programs." AHIMA Press Release. Available at [...] or e-mail [...] for more information.
15. For a complete list of current AHIMA publications, go to [...] or call (800) 335-5535.
16. American Health Information Management Association. *Evolving HIM Careers*. Chicago, IL: 1999, p. 53.

A Vision of the Future

In 1996, AHIMA's Vision 2006 initiative described professional roles for the future, including an expanded role for coding professionals called "clinical data specialists."¹⁶ The Coding Futures Task Force completed a more detailed study to consider how future coding roles might be affected by technology. See "A Crystal Ball for Coding" in the January 2000 *Journal* (vol. 71, no. 1) for the task force's projections for coding professionals.

Support at Every Level

AHIMA provides products and services to support coders in every phase of their careers. Below is a breakdown of support services by career level. For more information, go to www.ahima.org and click on “Professional Development.”

Level One

- Coding Basics Web-based training (self-directed distance learning)
- Approval process for institutions, including distance learning programs offering coding courses
- AHIMA basic coding publications
- Approval process for coding certificate programs¹⁴
- AHIMA Communities of Practice
- Entry-level certification for Certified Coding Associate planned for Fall 2002
- Student membership in AHIMA available for individuals enrolled in Coding Basics program
- Some people prefer to start their careers with college preparation in HIM. Graduates are proficient in entry-level coding competencies upon completion of their program of study

Level Two

- AHIMA national and regional educational programs
- Coding (Society for Clinical Coding) Community of Practice
- Coding Roundtable discussion groups
- Coding Assessment and Training Solutions Web-based training
- AHIMA coding publications
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education, including *Journal of AHIMA* continuing education quizzes, National Convention sessions, audio seminars (more than 30 in 2002), and more
- AHIMA Web site
- AHIMA Library in the Communities of Practice

Level Three

- CCS (Certified Coding Specialist) credential, primarily for candidates who have mastered skills for hospital-related coding
- CCS-P (Certified Coding Specialist—Physician-based) credential, primarily for candidates who have mastered skills for physician service coding
- Coding Assessment and Training Solutions Web-based training
- Communities of Practice and Coding Roundtable activities for professional practice forums and educational discussions
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education
- AHIMA Library in the Communities of Practice

Level Four

- AHIMA-accredited HIT academic programs
- FORE scholarships and loans for education
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education

Level Five

- AHIMA-accredited HIT academic programs and specialty advancement certificates
- FORE scholarships and loans
- AHIMA publications for clinical data management¹⁵
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education

Level Six

- AHIMA-accredited HIA academic programs
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education

Level Seven

- FORE research scholarships, loans, and grants
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education
- Specialty advancement program in clinical data management proposed for spring 2002
- Specialty advancement program in beginning medical informatics under consideration

Level Eight

- Fellowship status
- FORE research scholarships, loans, and grants
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education

Level Nine

- Fellowship status
- FORE research scholarships, loans, and grants
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- Specialty advancement courses currently under consideration
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education

Level Ten

- FORE research scholarships, dissertation loans, and grants
- Fellowship status
- Communities of Practice and AHIMA Library
- AHIMA-sponsored continuing education

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