Coding Career Path

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A career path for coding professionals at Intermountain Healthcare maps out the opportunities for advancement and the criteria for getting there.

A career path is not a straight line, and it isn't the same for every coding professional or within every healthcare facility. However, career paths all have one starting point, and that is education, whether academic or on-the-job training. And good career paths lead to similar outcomes: career advancement for coders and coder retention for organizations.

A career path offers coders opportunities to gain expertise in coding multiple patient types, enabling them to progress to higher job classifications, higher salaries, and leadership roles within their organizations.

For organizations, these career opportunities provide incentives that help them retain their current coders and recruit new ones in a competitive market. Depending on the model, career paths can also produce productivity gains by promoting cross-training.

One organization serious about career paths is Intermountain Healthcare in Salt Lake City, UT.

Increasing Opportunity and Equity

Intermountain Healthcare is a nonprofit health system with more than 26,000 employees. Traditionally, all coders were classified simply as “coder,” a one-size-fits-all category. This model changed when ancillary services began to require medical necessity checks and front-end coding to obtain advanced beneficiary notices.

At that time, as part of a corporate initiative, HIM participated in a task force that developed a process to identify the need for notices in the laboratory. As a result of that work, corporate HIM created an ancillary coding class for laboratory staff, who are largely phlebotomists. The course included the basic outpatient coding guidelines and lessons, touching on all chapters in ICD-9-CM and was taught by corporate HIM over three eight-hour days.

Once employees completed the class and passed an exam, they were permitted to check for medical necessity edits and assign a final diagnosis code for laboratory services when no other outpatient service was provided on that day. These employees were designated ancillary coders.

At the same time, HIM staff with medical terminology background were able to take the same class and were eligible to code in HIM for other ancillary services. There then emerged a second coder classification, coding specialist.

In order to keep the skill level current for the ancillary coders, corporate HIM performed quarterly coding validation reviews and provided annual training for the coders. Some of those coders progressed within HIM to the coding specialist position.

External forces contributed to the next development. Intermountain, like most facilities in the country, suffers from a shortage of coders. However, it faces some unique challenges because there are multiple vendors in Salt Lake City that hire skilled coders. Therefore, the health system was faced with losing trained and seasoned coders to much higher salaries elsewhere. That retention issue led Intermountain to look to a career path as a way to offer its coders more in their coding careers at Intermountain.

It became evident that the system that was currently in place was not equitable and that Intermountain needed to re-evaluate the model and create a proposal for a more robust career pathóand it did. The first career path helped, but it did not completely

meet the needs of the coders or the individual facilities in which they worked.

Coders voiced concerns and dissatisfaction with the first model for several reasons. They did not feel that the RHIT credential was valued since movement in the career path recognized the CCS as the superior credential. The first model also required a great deal of effort to move forward to a higher level. Coders did not feel progression was easily obtainable, and they felt they were stuck in their current levels.

In addition, coding managers did not have adequate time to devote to training, which prolonged coder progression to next levels. Intermountain also realized it needed to consider the impact of hiring new coders at advanced levels. That process had to be made equitable for existing coders.

The Intermountain Coding Career Path

Coding professionals at Intermountain Healthcare progress through four job levels based on duties and qualifications. They advance to the next level as they meet minimum criteria and begin training to code the additional patient types in the new level. Coders also are eligible for trainer, coordinator, and compliance consultant positions within the organization.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Coding Specialist I</td></tr>
<tr><td>All functional job duties as follows:
Accurate and timely coding and abstracting
Ancillary encounters
Nomenclature (ICD-9-CM)
Ensure data integrity, including:
Appropriate sequencing
Appropriate disposition
Continuing education
Compliant with state and federal regulations
Meeting corporate productivity and quality standards</td><td>Minimum qualifications include:
High school diploma or GED equivalent
Thorough understanding of medical terminology (e.g., 6–12 months medical office experience, experience in a healthcare setting)
Good computer skills and knowledge
Effective written and verbal communication skills
Preferred:
Anatomy and physiology
Knowledge of 3M coding software</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Coding Specialist II</td></tr>
<tr><td>All functional job duties as follows (in addition to the above key functions):
Accurate and timely coding and abstracting
Outpatient and/or inpatient encounters
Nomenclature (ICD-9-CM)
Classification (CPT-4)
Ensure data integrity including:
Appropriate sequencing
Appropriate disposition
Abstracting
Continuing education</td><td>Minimum qualifications include (in addition to the above minimum qualifications):Preferred:
Pathophysiology
Knowledge of 3M coding and abstracting software
Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT) or Certified Coding Associate (CCA) certification
Completion of coding program or one year hospital coding experience
Demonstrated basic knowledge of inpatient or outpatient coding guidelines</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Coding Specialist III</td></tr>
<tr><td>All functional job duties as follows (in addition to the above key functions):
Cross-trained with the ability to code at least two of the following patient types (as needed):
Inpatient
Same-day surgery</td><td>Minimum qualifications include (in addition to the above minimum qualifications):
Holds at least one of the following AHIMA credentials:
CCA
RHIT</td></tr>
</table>

◦ ER • Ability to mentor and train other coders	◦ Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA) • Anatomy and physiology or demonstrates proficiency • Pathophysiology or demonstrates proficiency • Knowledge of PPS methodology for inpatient and/or outpatient encounters *Preferred:* • Certified Coding Specialist (CCS)
Coding Specialist IV	
All functional job duties as follows (in addition to the above key functions): • Consistently exceed productivity standards for one year within HIM Coding Specialist III position • Code all patient types as needed: inpatient, same-day surgery, ER, ancillary • Mentor and train other coders as needed	*Minimum qualifications include (in addition to the above minimum qualifications):* • CCS certification (additional credentials above-CCA, RHIT, RHIA-are not required) • Knowledge of PPS methodology for inpatient and outpatient encounters
Coding Trainer	
All functional job duties as follows (in addition to the above key functions of level IV): • This individual has no direct reports and is responsible for the training of newly hired coders and cross-training of coding staff. • The trainer is responsible for following the corporate guidelines for standardized coder training. They are used as a resource for coding questions and will fill in as a coder as required by volumes.	*Minimum qualifications include:* • Minimum qualifications for coding specialist IV or minimum of 3 years acute coding experience • Excellent verbal and written communication skills • Ability to multitask
Coding Coordinator	
All functional job duties as follows (in addition to the above key functions of level IV): • This individual has no direct reports and is responsible for daily operations for the coding staff. This may include the following: • Coding assignments • Coding resource for questions • Quality reviews and feedback to coders • Training (when no trainer is designated)	*Minimum qualifications include:* • Minimum qualifications for coding specialist IV or minimum of 3 years acute coding experience • Excellent verbal and written communication skills Ability to multitask
Coding Supervisor	
All functional job duties as follows (in addition to the above key functions of level IV): • This individual has direct reports, which would include any of the following: ◦ Coders ◦ Coordinators ◦ Trainers ◦ Documentation specialists/coordinators • Function as a coder as needed to ensure goals and productivity are being met.	*Minimum qualifications include (in addition to the above minimum qualifications):* • Minimum qualifications for coding specialists IV or minimum of 3 years acute care coding experience • Excellent verbal and written communication skills • Prior employee mentoring and coaching accountabilities, or significant project management experience • Ability to organize and partner with leadership to achieve necessary outcomes and goals

• Function as an organizational leader and help support leadership and management strategy, while balancing day-to-day operations.	

Career Path 2.0

The first revision of the career path model was developed and presented to coders in 2006. The new model features one additional level and allows coders to move to the next level once they begin cross-training and meet any of the other criteria (see the model [above]).

At the same time, salaries were re-evaluated for coders and coding management staff. The rollout of the new model to coders included both the new career path model as well as increases in salary ranges. Intermountain also added additional positions to the model that included facility trainers, coding coordinators, and documentation coordinators. The table "Smoothing the Path," above, illustrates the differences between the original and revised models.

In the corporate office, HIM staff includes compliance consultants who perform coding validation reviews. Those positions were also re-evaluated to include three levels based on experience and expertise. HIM coders are encouraged to consider those positions as they become available, as those positions can offer a challenge with more responsibility and movement within the organization.

Smoothing the Path

The first career path was a good start, but experience showed room for improvement. The revised path offers faster progression and more opportunities for growth.

Feature	Original Career Path	Revised Career Path
Coding levels	3	4
Opportunity to advance	Coder must be proficient in new patient type before moving forward Salary lower than market	Coders move as soon as they begin training in new patient type Provides more opportunity for growth Aligns salaries to market
Credentials	Did not recognize the RHIT credential as a qualification in moving forward	RHIT slots coder in level II to start, even if no experience
Productivity standards	Must be met for 12 consecutive months	Must be met over a 12-month average
Room to grow beyond coding	Supervisor positions when available	Creation of more leadership roles such as trainers, coordinators, and supervisors

The Making of the Model

Revising the original career ladder required a number of resources. The development team reviewed nationwide coding salary surveys that contained categories based on years of experience and certification. It also reviewed regional and local salary surveys performed by the human resources department.

Analysis of turnover and retention issues regarding coding staff throughout the corporation and within specific regions and corporations helped identify needs and challenges. Not to the team's surprise, it found that some regions and facilities face significant challenges filling coding positions due to a lack of appropriately educated applicants, while other regions could often hire from an abundance of educated, though not necessarily experienced or highly experienced, applicants.

The development team consisted of corporate HIM leadership, regional and facility HIM leadership, CFO support and guidance, human resources representation, regional and facility coding managers and supervisors, and lead coders. The human resources representatives were instrumental in guiding the team through the entire process of developing and implementing the career path.

Some of the challenges stemmed from the scope and diversity of the organization itself. The team was challenged with creating a model that was applicable and functional for all hospital-based coders throughout the corporation. Intermountain Healthcare encompasses 21 acute care hospitals ranging from very small rural community hospitals, including critical access facilities, to large urban tertiary care hospitals. The coding needs within each of those facilities vary significantly, including different cross-training needs and, in some cases, specialization requirements such as rehabilitation unit coding.

The model needed to be broad enough to encompass all of these needs and flexible enough to provide options for coders to progress. The development team also sought a model that promoted a more efficient use of coding resources throughout the system. It did not want to limit coders located in small rural facilities from assisting larger more complex facilities with their coding needs due to a lack of experience or exposure to specific procedures, cases, or specialty units.

Cross-training, both within a facility and, where possible, between facilities, was the key to accomplishing this goal. The opportunity for coders to broaden the scope of their knowledge promoted job satisfaction and better positioned them to obtain their coding certification. It also helped coders better manage days not final billed.

Motivation and Commitment

Some of the newer coders did not see value in the new model at first, but as they developed coding skills they realized the benefits. Once coders begin a new patient type and meet additional criteria, they are able to move up the path, where in the past they had to become proficient in that type before moving.

This was well received by coders; they did not feel the reach was so great that it was unobtainable. They felt that the amount of work was equal to the reward, and it motivated them to push themselves a bit more. The revised path encourages coders to keep from getting too comfortable with one type of coding because of the incentive to move forward. Additionally, recognition of the RHIT enabled coders to step directly into level II of the coding path as a starting point.

The model does require a commitment from Intermountain to invest in the cross-training of coding staff. The revised model includes a coding services trainer. This position typically functions on a regional basis and covers training needs for multiple facilities. The model also requires coders at the top of the career path mentor and train their peers, assisting them with advancement within the career path. Guidelines help ensure consistent training throughout the enterprise.

Specific levels of the career path require coders to record and submit productivity data and to consistently exceed facility-specific productivity requirements. These coders are also required to meet quality requirements, and of course this means auditing for coding accuracy.

The model requires completion of a college-level anatomy and physiology course or requires the coder to demonstrate an understanding. If a coder requires education, Intermountain provides tuition reimbursement. Career counseling is also available through the human resources department, although it has been sought more frequently by staff wanting to get into coding as opposed to those already in coding positions.

Newly hired coding supervisors and managers must fully understand the career path, as there is turnover in those positions as well. Coding leadership will periodically revisit the new career path and verify that all facilities are applying the model in a standard fashion so that coders advance equally throughout the corporation.

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