

Coding on the Home Front

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by Ann Zeisset, RHIT, CCS-P

Recently, a group of coders participated in a survey about their day-to-day experiences as remote, or at-home coders. The survey asked a series of questions related to the positives and negatives of coding at home versus coding in the more traditional office setting. Below is a summary of the survey findings.

Ask coders how they envision an “ideal” job or how they might be more satisfied in their current coding positions, and many will say they would like to work at home. Lucky for them, the trend seems to be headed in that direction.

One reason for the shift from office to home is a critical shortage of certified coders. Due to the implementation of prospective payment systems, which has required additional skills and responsibilities from the coding function, there has been an increased demand for coding professionals in an array of work settings. Many facilities are unable to recruit qualified coders because of their locations. Fortunately, home coding companies have come to the rescue by employing coders and making the medical record available in an electronic or scanned format so that the employee can work in a remote setting.

By offering these same options, many facilities are also able to employ staff who live in different cities or states. In fact, several of the survey participants were able to retain their current positions after relocating. This new trend offers facilities an additional option when they are located in an area with a coder shortage. Some facilities may also adopt this solution because of space constraints, or as a retention benefit for highly qualified staff.

Several coders shared their telecommuting experiences, and the descriptions of their daily routines give us a glimpse at the benefits and challenges of coding at home.

Experience Necessary

Many new students in coding programs have expressed an interest in being a home coder. In fact, many people are entering the field to do exactly that.

It is clear that experience is critical for coders assigned to work at home, and all respondents said that coding credentials were important. Of the respondents, the average amount of coding experience is 14 years. This group codes all types of records, including inpatient, emergency, outpatient, and surgery.

An Investment in Convenience

One process in home coding that varies is the acquisition of office equipment. Of the participants, 40 percent say that the employee furnishes the desk/chair workstation, and the employer furnishes all other equipment, including a computer and supplies. Of the other 60 percent, the employee is responsible for the computer and office equipment, with the employer supplying software and reference materials such as books.

Some coders do not consider the investment in some equipment much of a drawback. According to Amy Hilty, RHIT, of Wakefield, MI, “I made an investment to be able to code from home, but to me, it is well worth it.”

Many responded that security is an issue when setting up a home office, because many of the coders are required to have a private and secure area to work. “I had to provide an office or room with a door that could be kept closed for confidentiality purposes,” says Christine Lintker, RHIT, CCS, who works from Centralia, IL.

Because coding from home requires computer access to the remote facility, all the home coders agree that technical problems occasionally provided challenges. Most also agree, however, that they are well supported by the IS department or encoder vendor. A few coders report that they have become more technologically proficient and actually resolve many issues themselves.

If a coder is the first home coder in a facility, he or she may be more involved in the process of securing the local ISP provider, DSL access, and encoding vendor. After that, home coders should most likely encounter only the day-to-day operational issues of PCs and printers.

Home Delivery

Most of the coders surveyed reported that they currently have access to the parts of the medical record they need for coding, although the processes through which they receive those records differ. Most facilities scan parts of the record (many omit the nurse's notes) while some scan the entire record. Regardless of the way in which they receive records, all coders reported that they receive enough information to accurately code the record. If they occasionally need additional information, they simply request the missing document.

The majority of coders agree that electronic access to references is critical because most use encoders. All coders stated they must have electronic access to download and upload assignments each day. While many reference materials were mentioned, *Coding Clinic* and *CPT Assistant* were cited as crucial.

The physician query process is handled in a slightly different manner by all of the respondents. All reported having a method of query and a process for pending a record. Some respond to the physician directly either via letter or e-mail, others send the requests to a supervisor, quality assurance consultant, or compliance consultant, and others send the question to the facility, where it is placed in the medical record for physician clarification.

Staying on Task

Almost all the coders have productivity measures of some sort. Because there can be a difference in duties, these can vary. Many are required to complete the records sent to them within either 24 or 48 hours. Their supervisors have already calculated the expected number of records and sent the appropriate amount. Others have daily productivity standards. The most frequently reported numbers were:

- Emergency 20 records per hour
- Inpatient 3-4 records per hour
- Ambulatory surgery 6-8 records per hour

Quality is also important, with all coders reporting regular monitoring. The exact specifics for the process vary: some facilities perform quality checks daily, weekly, monthly, every tenth record, or other similar routines. Some of the coders also review each others' work.

Due to the distance between employee and employer, most of the coders do not attend on-site meetings or social functions, but rather use teleconferencing or Webcasts to connect with their colleagues.

Positives Outweigh Negatives

Overall, the positives of remote coding outweigh the negatives. Below is a list of the most commonly reported benefits and drawbacks:

Drawbacks:

- lack of social interaction
- lack of nearby technical support
- not having other coders nearby for help
- interruptions and family distractions
- workflow problems (for example, a hospital sending two hours of work for an eight-hour employee)

Benefits:

- additional time at home with family
- flexibility
- a more “relaxed” lifestyle
- avoiding travel in poor weather conditions
- a quiet atmosphere and ability to concentrate
- increased independence (due to other coders not being around to assist)
- improved productivity (due to fewer distractions)
- more challenging coding assignments

Doing Their Homework

The coders surveyed agreed that coding at home takes a lot of advanced preparation and may even require additional knowledge or skills. Several found additional knowledge about computer technology to be a necessity.

Dori Lipscomb, CCS, of Pensacola, FL, advises that those planning to code from home take a basic computer class. She also suggested obtaining access to a cable modem or DSL because phone lines can be very slow. It is also important to clarify expectations and limits for family members or outside callers when working from home.

To stay at the top of the game, CE credits are critical for home coders. All stated that they gain CE through the many avenues available, including attending meetings and seminars, CE opportunities provided by the company or encoding vendors, online quizzes, and audio seminars.

In addition to the time commitment—by both employee and employer—to get the home coding process up and running, there is no question that coding at home takes careful planning and a dedicated, experienced coder. According to the coders surveyed, it also requires self-discipline and self-motivation. “To truly enjoy working at home, you must have a passion for the profession. It requires a great deal of flexibility and structure to stay on track,” says Ann Ervin, RHIT, CCS, of Rock Hill, SC.

With those skills intact, remote coding for some coders might just be home sweet home.

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