

Communities of Practice: Harnessing the Power of Knowledge

Save to myBoK

by Laura Lane

AHIMA's Communities of Practice was designed with members's needs in mind: up-to-date industry news, links to helpful resources, and, most importantly, solutions and ideas from peers. Already, the CoP is an indispensable tool. Read how AHIMA members are making it work for them.

Imagine a place where HIM professionals can learn from one another about the latest HIPAA compliance issues, ask questions about the best way to code a manually assisted delivery, and explore AHIMA's new job and resume bank. Imagine a place where you can increase your HIM knowledge by having access to industry news at the click of a mouse.

For AHIMA members, this place is a reality. The Communities of Practice (CoP), launched at the AHIMA convention last October, provide instant access to this kind of information and more. All you have to do is go to AHIMA's Web site and complete an online profile to enter. There's no cost and no limit to the number of communities members can visit or join.

Linked by Information

This kind of forum is not a new or radical idea. Business professionals have touted and coveted the value of the combined wisdom of many for a long time.

More than two years ago, the Harvard Business Review discussed a "new organizational form emerging in companies that run on knowledge: the community of practice." The article described the members of such groups as "informally bound together by shared expertise and a passion for a joint enterprise." Further, such communities "organize themselves, meaning they set their own agendas and establish their own leadership," the writers state. "The strength of communities of practice is self-perpetuating. As they generate knowledge, they reinforce and renew themselves."¹ Recognizing the value of such knowledge, AHIMA focused on creating a tool that would provide members the opportunity to exchange it at the same speed at which the field is changing.

In February 2001, several thousand AHIMA members working in integrated delivery systems or ambulatory care facilities or with ambulatory payment classifications were selected to participate in "beta" communities. Interest was significant—more than 600 members initially signed up for the integrated delivery systems community. These early users put the CoP to work and helped shape the interface members use today.

CoPs were designed to be self-sustaining and member driven. To that end, each community has AHIMA members serving as volunteer facilitators who monitor the community, organize chats, and gather information to post as resources at least once a week, and often daily.

CoPs at Work

The immediate ability to disseminate, exchange, and share information is a powerful tool in keeping pace with changes in the HIM field. Time and again, CoP users are turning to one another online for support, ideas, and new information.

Instead of a replacement for face-to-face interaction or communicating by telephone, access to people in HIM through online communities of shared interest is an enhancement: it's one more way to communicate, to ask questions, to share expertise.

AHIMA president-elect Barbara Siegel, MS, RHIT, is director of HIM at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. Working in a large university medical center, she knows the value of connecting with colleagues in increasingly complex surroundings.

"I look to others for innovative solutions or just confirmation that what I am doing is reasonable," Siegel says. "Connecting with members is key to understanding practice needs and professional concerns. It becomes more and more difficult to find time to connect either in person or even by telephone."

Siegel also considers the AHIMA Library a major advantage. Siegel taps into the Association's online body of knowledge to track down information when she needs it. "It saves me time in locating key documents or articles that I know I've read in the past but don't have the time to sort through folders or *Journals* to locate," she said.

Sue Powell, RHIA, knows the value of keeping current on the latest information and of sharing real-life experiences with others facing the same issues. Staying ahead of the game by using the CoP makes sense to her. Powell is president-elect of the Minnesota Health Information Management Association (MNHIMA) and helps facilitate both the Minnesota CoP and one for MNHIMA's board of directors. "We have been able to use both sites to give our members instant access to information, as well as get their response to issues immediately," Powell says.

On the Minnesota community, she's posted the Winter Team Talks agenda and asked attendees in advance to be ready to discuss certain topics. She's sought distinguished member nominations and sent out updates on the group's annual meeting and golf tournament scholarship fund-raiser. And she's solicited feedback on how the state's community site could be improved.

"We conduct our business on a day-to-day level much more effectively. We've been able to reach our members in rural areas faster than we normally could," Powell says. "We are able to give members information as soon as it is available versus waiting for a quarterly release of our newsletter or trying to send an e-mail to 1,000-plus members."

In fact, HIM news reaches members sooner than through MNHIMA's own Web site: "Technically, we get to our members faster via the CoP than by our Web site," Powell explains. "Instead of needing a Web master to update our site, we have five facilitators who can do that instantly."

President-elect Siegel notes, too, the value of spreading the word quickly through the communities affected. "We can respond to industry happenings quicker with member input and also collaborate on a daily basis if needed on key issues," Siegel says.

The CoP is not meant to take the place of face-to-face meetings. However, according to Siegel, there are great benefits to online communication within a group of people working in the same field hundreds or thousands of miles apart. "The CoP is a terrific way to increase our connections between the face-to-face and phone contacts," she says.

A Medium for Feedback

Immediate member feedback is a major CoP amenity. As a member of the House of Delegates, Powell says she is better able to gauge sentiment by reading member responses posted through the threaded discussion feature.

"It's great that we are getting feedback from our members—that really didn't happen before CoP," Powell adds. "As a delegate, I think it's been extremely helpful getting feedback from other delegates before we vote on an issue, or even before we get to Team Talks or a meeting to discuss the issues," she says. "Overall, delegates are getting way more information regarding issues than before the CoP, so hopefully we are making a more informed decision as we place our votes."

Another form of feedback is available through the CoP polling mechanism. Many CoPs have a community poll. For example, in mid-March, the AHIMA community asked if the most successful approach to ensuring patient privacy was to be proactive to prevent future errors or be punitive and punish those who commit such errors so that there's no recurrence.

"I particularly enjoy the polls and see potential for groups to get quick feedback on issues of mutual concern," says Kathleen Feher, MA, RHIA, FHIMSS, an adjunct faculty member at Southwestern Illinois College. "I have suggested several poll ideas on some of the CoPs because I have found them to be a great way to answer that question that we all hear on occasion: Well, what does everybody else do about [this issue]? I realize that it isn't a statistical study, but the responses do at least give you a benchmark to work from."

From “Town Hall” to Behavioral Health

A quick tour of the communities and neighborhoods provides a glimpse of the diverse elements the CoPs offer.

The AHIMA community functions as a global “town hall.” Members use the AHIMA community to find out and share ideas about new AHIMA programs, credentials, and general questions and concerns.

That’s where Feher is getting her information on AHIMA’s proposed privacy credential. “I have been trying to keep up with the threads dealing with the new privacy credential now to stay informed about members’ opinions on that issue,” she says. “I check the sites pretty much on a daily basis or at least several times a week if things get a little hectic. I have found it to be very helpful to keep up with any new developments on breaking issues.”

As an educator, Feher appreciates the postings she finds between educators and students. “It was exciting to demonstrate to the students how the CoP can be of benefit to them too,” she says. “I hope they continue to avail themselves of the many great features.”

The more than 90 other communities represent all sorts of professional groups, ranging from behavioral health to coding, where there are nine sub-communities known as “neighborhoods.” In the general coding community, members can follow and engage in discussions on how to code a closed rib fracture or the nuances of coding for persons with diabetes.

In the HIPAA community, members can access and download the act’s rules and standards. More than 1,000 readers have inquired there so far. More than 2,200 have clicked to view samples of forms necessitated by the new privacy rules. HIPAA community facilitator Jill Callahan Dennis, JD, RHIA, a consultant at Health Risk Advantage in Colorado, says the CoPs grow the knowledge of the membership as a whole.

“It’s valuable to see what questions others are having as they prepare to comply with the regulations,” she says. “Lots of times, other members will have questions I hadn’t thought of before, and working to answer those questions collaboratively really helps us all learn from each other.”

That willingness to help one another reflects a sense of true community. “It’s really satisfying to know that there are others out there you can go to,” Dennis says. “It makes me feel like I have a lot of really capable partners out there to turn to.”

Some communities will flow and evolve but stay online indefinitely. Others may come and go or be customized, given issues that arise. AHIMA members can propose a new community if the need arises. In any community, the vitality and rewards that result from associating with colleagues depend on members sharing the diverse ideas, tips, and wisdom they gain on the job—and outside it.

That’s what the AHIMA CoP initiative strives for: a direct sharing of experience and revelations that can enhance the important work members carry out every day. “As an AHIMA member service, the Communities of Practice, I believe, will be one of the highest member-valued products,” Siegel says.

Making the Case for the Internet at Work

Increasingly, Internet access is a given in many workplaces. But not every hospital, clinic, or doctor’s office has easy Internet access for all employees. In some cases, Internet access may be limited, especially if your job doesn’t directly require you to use the Web or e-mail.

If you don’t currently have Internet access at work, you may need to convince your supervisor or employer that there are compelling business reasons for you to have access. Using the Communities of Practice as an example of a useful workplace tool is a great place to start.

Using the Communities of Practice, you can:

- access cutting-edge HIM practice information—both published (in the AHIMA Library, the Association’s online body of knowledge) and from your fellow members’ experience

- keep abreast of late-breaking news that affects HIM
- locate experts or members with similar interests and situations through the member search
- ask your peers for advice about hard-to-handle situations
- improve your professional network and build your contacts in the field—handy when you need help or need to fill an open staff position

Of course, www.ahima.org isn't the only useful site on the Web. Other helpful sources of HIM-related news and information are:

- <http://aspe.hhs.gov/admsimp/Index.htm>—the US Department of Health and Human Services' administrative simplification page offers updates and information on HIPAA
- www.cms.gov—get information on all of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' programs here
- www.jcaho.org—the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations site gives the latest on this accrediting body
- www.lmrp.net—view local medical review policy changes here
- www.medlineplus.gov—health information from the world's largest medical library, the National Library of Medicine

For more examples of useful Web sites, see the practice brief "Internet Resources for HIM Professionals" published in the April 2001 *Journal of AHIMA* (available online at www.ahima.org).

Note

1. Wenger, Etienne C. and William M. Snyder. "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier." *Harvard Business Review* (January/February 2000).

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