

# Compliance Officers Climb the Corporate Ladder

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by Jane Blumenthal

A recent survey questioned healthcare executives to determine the current standing of healthcare compliance officers in today's healthcare industry. Survey results showed that compliance is a top priority among all facets of the healthcare industry, as shown by the 86 percent of respondents who indicated their healthcare facility or system had a compliance program in place. Of those facilities that did not have a compliance officer in place, 69 percent said they plan to hire one in the next 12 months.

The survey, performed by the Health Care Compliance Association (HCCA) and Tyler & Company, a healthcare executive search firm, aimed to shed light on the relatively new job role of compliance officer. Results, which can be found in the *1998 Profile of Healthcare Compliance Officers*, come from hospitals and healthcare systems that have more than 200 beds. The survey questioned attorneys, chief financial officers (CFO), chief executive officers, and healthcare compliance officers.

The position's rapid growth is an important finding, according to Mary Wynkoop, vice president and national leader of Tyler & Company's compliance practice. Only 12.5 percent of respondents said that their healthcare system had a compliance officer on staff prior to the current one. Further, the survey showed that the definition of compliance officer remains undefined, with just over half of respondents indicating their organization had a job description for the compliance officer position. In addition, 45 percent of respondents say they perform compliance officer duties under a different title. Employees that most commonly serve in this dual role have job titles such as executive/senior vice president, internal auditor, CFO, general counsel, and director of the business office.

"There are no set rules on who holds this position or their backgrounds," says Wynkoop. While the majority (91 percent) of respondents indicated that the compliance officer would have direct interaction with the organization's auditing department, many different types of skill sets are being sought. The industry experience deemed most important to the compliance officer role is related to roles like attorney, CPA, healthcare consulting, human resources, government, physician executive, and manufacturing.

More important, many healthcare executives are also seeking a compliance officer who has healthcare industry-specific knowledge, including:

- coding
- reimbursement
- federal healthcare regulations
- risk management
- medical terminology
- quality improvement

Health information management professionals have already proven their skill sets match those necessary to be a compliance officer (see "Breaking Down Barriers," *Journal of AHIMA*, 70:1 (January 1999), page 96). Yet stiff competition from other professionals remains. To gain these positions, HIM professionals must openly market their abilities.

## Where It's Heading

With the direction it is taking, the compliance officer role promises to become a high-level position. As the position develops, compensation and responsibility levels are expected to rise, says Wynkoop. "Typically, the compliance officer reports to the CEO—normally a vice presidential position in an organization's structure. A number of the positions are not there yet, which is why we took this survey. It is a building block to what the reporting structure and compensation levels should be."

Currently, compensation runs across the board, with the majority (47 percent) of compliance officers making \$79,000 or less per year. However, 38 percent of respondents reportedly earn more than \$100,000 per year. Projected salary increase for the majority (54 percent) of compliance officers surveyed is between 3 and 5 percent in the coming year.

The compliance officer role is just one of many for HIM professionals, but, as the survey results show, it is still on the frontier of the healthcare industry. Even with its indefinite description, it specifically calls for someone with HIM skill sets. Compliance is not going away any time in the near future—it's time to take advantage of the opportunities it presents.

—J.B.

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