

Creatively Communicating: the Security Challenge

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by Anne Zender, MA, Director of Communications

Like many HIM professionals specializing in information security, Kimberly Lawrence, MS, RHIT, spends most of her time designing and reviewing policies. But she relishes the part of her job that calls on her to be creative, too.

“We’re always trying to come up with better ways to get the message across,” says Lawrence, information security coordinator at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, TN. For example, Lawrence helped coordinate activities at her organization to celebrate Computer Security Day on Nov. 30. She planned a seminar on home computer security awareness and created a security “booth” where staff members could answer a question about security and win a prize. “We plan an activity like that at least once a year, and it’s beneficial,” she says.

Conveying the Message—Again and Again

Creativity is just one of the necessary tools in Lawrence’s arsenal. Teaching and communication skills are also important. The organization’s 9,000 employees, including physicians, need to be continually educated on the importance of safeguarding patient information. And policies, procedures, and everyday issues need to be addressed.

Lawrence’s duties include developing content for new employee orientation and reviewing and updating existing policies. She works closely with an organization-wide security and privacy committee comprising representatives from the HIM, compliance, risk management, human resources, and legal departments. “I spend a lot of time resolving issues,” she says.

One common challenge, she says, is assigning levels of access to staff and ensuring that they get the appropriate security training. “You have to continually look at who has access and at controlling access to those who are authorized,” Lawrence says. “There are so many situations where there are different categories. You have to consider: does this person really have a need to know or is there a better way to approach the situation?”

Lawrence was introduced to the security world during her work for a master’s degree in health informatics. She had previously worked in some HIM-related areas, including as an information systems assistant in a healthcare system’s human resources department and on an MPI cleanup project. She also worked as a billing consultant. All of these helped prepare her for the work to come.

A Plan for HIPAA

Lawrence has played a key role in the organization’s HIPAA implementation process. At Vanderbilt, Lawrence says, the first step on the road to compliance was to form a HIPAA implementation committee. “Then, we had to create the education portion,” she says. Again, creativity and communication came in handy. The implementation team needed to educate senior management about HIPAA—what it is, what to expect, what kind of resources were needed. They also established a timeline and significant milestones to meet.

Currently, the HIPAA team is establishing two contact persons in each department who can be liaisons for HIPAA. They are also in the initial stages of a security and privacy assessment and inventory of all medical center information systems that contain patient health information. “It’s difficult to get a grasp on all the systems,” says Lawrence. “If you have someone in each area who can help to identify all affected systems, that helps.”

The importance of communication continues to be critical for HIPAA implementation and beyond, Lawrence says. For HIPAA, she advises colleagues, “You need to continue to educate people on HIPAA and how it affects them. Make it applicable to each group. Be specific. Depending on the size of your organization, this can be a challenge.”

“Not everyone knows what we do. Outside of the HIM department, we need to be ‘broadcasting’ what HIM professionals do. You have to ‘toot your own horn’ and that’s not easy for everyone to do.”

—*Kimberly Lawrence, information security coordinator, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, on HIM’s next challenge*

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