

Dot-com Coder

Save to myBoK

by Anne Zender, MA, editor

For many people, working with artificial intelligence may sound like something out of a science fiction movie. But for Amy Davis, RHIA, it's just part of the job.

Davis is coding specialist and knowledge engineer at DocCode.com, a company based in Jacksonville, FL. Davis's team is working on a coding inference engine that uses artificial intelligence and natural language processing to perform automated coding. The company has been developing this technology since 1994.

Davis develops rules for the coding product to use in applying ICD-9 codes to text in transcribed documents. She also audits the results to make sure the product is assigning codes appropriately.

The coding product is still in its elementary stages, Davis says—in fact, it's only just begun to be tested in clinical settings. She's interested not only in how the product will work, but in how coders will use it on the job. "We are testing in part to see how coders will interact with the product," she says. "We want to see if this is something that could help them."

A Ground-breaking Role

For Davis, the somewhat futuristic job title of "knowledge engineer" is just another step in a career that has taken many turns. She's always been involved with coding, working in areas such as DRG validation, utilization review, and tumor registry, among others. Since taking the job at DocCode.com in July 1999, she's relished the excitement that comes with doing something new. "I just took a chance," she says of her decision to take the job. "I wanted to be a part of something that was starting at the ground level."

Part of the challenge has been to introduce the concepts of coding to her colleagues, programmers and information systems experts who don't have expertise in that particular area. "They want to develop an understanding of what coding is all about," she says, and she's happy to help them. This kind of sharing is a good way for HIM professionals to "let people know who we are, what we can do, and what results we can have," she adds.

While she helps break new ground in coding, Davis is also breaking new ground in being a full-time telecommuter, working from her home in Kingsland, GA. She meets with colleagues working in states like Virginia and Florida only periodically at the company's central office.

While she enjoys the quiet and flexibility her working arrangement offers her, she admits that sometimes inter-office communication can be a challenge. "We're working to overcome that with a company electronic bulletin board to post questions, e-mail, and a company calling card," Davis says.

She says that telecommuting also requires a unique kind of self-discipline. "I need to be very focused to stay on task. I don't usually get lonesome. If I do, I try to intersperse my daily work with activities outside my home."

Nothing to Fear

Although she works on an ultramodern product, Davis doesn't think that HIM professionals have anything to fear from the increasing computerization of functions such as coding. "A lot of people get intimidated; they think they're being replaced," she says. "But human interaction with any product will always be necessary. The person using the product needs a certain knowledge level of coding—we don't want to become reliant on the machine. The product we're working on can help coders be more productive and save them time. We'll still need those coders—focusing on documentation issues, applying guidelines, and keeping up on regulations."

And as for her own future, Davis is optimistic. "To work at a company with such technology may seem a little intimidating. Not everyone wants to do it," she acknowledges. "But I like to see my time and efforts making a difference. Seeing things blossom and come to fruition is the most important thing."

Article Citation:

Zender, Anne. "A Dot-com Coder." *Journal of AHIMA* 71, no. 7 (2000): 92.

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