

E-assistance for Coding Professionals

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Is the Web a part of your work day? Make sure it is. From purchasing products to distance learning to online coding, coding professionals can find all kinds of resources online to meet their needs.

A Look at the Future

In a recent survey, health system CEOs were asked what they anticipated in terms of information system needs.¹ The top five responses were:

1. Use emerging technologies (e.g., Internet)
2. Address changes in accreditation and federal and state requirements
3. Improve decision support for clinicians
4. Improve productivity and reduce costs
5. Improve patient-care capabilities

In the next two years, health system CEOs planned to spend less than previous years—only 2.5 percent of the facilities' total budgets. Capital budget system hardware spending was projected to increase about 8 percent from previous years. When interviewed, the majority of these CEOs said they expected to devote their spending toward improving their existing health information applications, rather than investing in new ones. As a result, new coding and abstracting systems, including investments in natural language processing, may have to wait. Fortunately, online coding resources continue to thrive.

E-coding Products and Services

The latest challenges in coding-APCs, OASIS, RUGs, HIPAA, ICD-10-CM, ICD-10-PCS—are straining existing coding systems. In searching for alternatives, the Internet is one logical place coders can go. The search results for "coding" fall into the following categories:

Coding Products

Many coding products and consulting companies have Web sites showcasing their products. This is a good way for shoppers to do some efficient comparison shopping among the various vendors and products, such as code books and reference books.

Online Coding Services

More and more healthcare providers are looking to the Web for coding support. Using available technology, patient information is sent to coding professionals for code assignment and returned to the facility ready for claims processing. The advantages of online coding services include:

- accessibility
- ability to handle backlogs
- savings on on-site contract coder travel costs

The disadvantages of online coding support are primarily the cost and security concerns. Factors that potential users should consider before using e-coding services include:

- educational background and credentials of coders
- continuing education and resources available to coders
- quality management procedures

- productivity standards
- turn-around time guarantees
- company reliability (e.g., Better Business Bureau rating)
- company history
- number of employees
- number of clients
- customer references
- availability of a contact person to address day-to-day questions
- willingness to work under your facility's HIPAA requirements
- price
- reliability and feasibility of technology

Most experts caution that online coding is not a temporary or quick-fix solution for coding backlogs. Rather, Internet-based coding services can be a workable solution to the coding professional shortage.

Consultants, Professional Associations, and More

For facilities with established ties to consultants, professional associations, and large healthcare information systems, the Internet can provide quick answers to coding questions and access to the most current information about new codes and new payer coding policies. Further, the free e-mail newsletters consultants or associations offer to clients or members provide timely and accessible new information that coding professionals can rely on.

Online Education

Internet access to education provides a convenient and affordable way for coding professionals to continue their education.² Many vendors now offer Internet access to "live" workshops or seminars or offer an archived version for those who could not attend sessions held outside their facility or during work hours. Chat sessions held after the workshops allow a chance to network and ask questions.

Several colleges and universities are now offering some or all of the health information technology, health information administration, or coding specialist programs via the Internet.³ Students can take classes at their own pace and in their own home or office. Chat rooms allow them to interact with other students. Examinations are pre-scheduled for a narrow time window. Instructors' e-mails and toll-free telephone numbers allow one-on-one time for students to get all of their questions answered.

There's no question that the technology revolutionizing the way we communicate, bank, make travel arrangements, and obtain information will affect HIM. Already, solutions and references are available in abundance via the Internet. Make it a priority to take advantage of these resources.

Notes

1. Morrissey, John. "Wanting More From Information Technology." *Modern Healthcare* 31, no. 6 (2001): 66-84.
2. Go to www.ahima.org/careers/ for more information about online learning programs.

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