

Embarking on a Compliance Career

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by Barbara Dingman, MBA, RHIA, CFE

When I was given the responsibility of developing a compliance plan for my hospital two years ago, I was initially overwhelmed. My background was in medical records and I did not have a book on my shelf to guide me. Fortunately, I soon found numerous agencies and associations, colleagues, and printed resources to provide direction and assistance.

No Stone Unturned

To begin, I contacted the legal division of my state hospital association, which gave me the URL for the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and its work plan. When I called my state HIM association, I found that they were not much further along than I was at that time. (Since the formation of AHIMA's Compliance Task Force, things have changed considerably at the state level.) Another resource was the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA), which guided me to publications, Web sites, and consultants specializing in compliance.

I called every contact given to me during my first six months as compliance officer. Within a few weeks I had more information on my desk than time to consume it. But in a short time, after poring over what I had time to read, I was speaking the compliance language.

The numerous magazines and articles that HIM professionals receive provided much of the information I needed. While compliance programs must follow the guidelines established by the OIG, each facility enhances their programs to fit the unique needs of their organization. It was helpful to use other facilities as models to develop my facility's program, because I saw things in other plans that I had not thought about for ours. While no one resource can walk you through compliance specifically for your facility, there is a national bank of resources at your fingertips. You may find some information that ultimately may not benefit your program, but you will still learn from it. I can promise you that the first compliance plan you write will not stay the same over time.

To learn about fraud investigation, contact the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners in Austin, TX. They teach investigation into fraud at many levels. Although it isn't required, I got my CFE. If a situation that requires a fraud examiner arises, use the resources available to do this through your in-house auditor, audit firm, or through a contract firm. These groups have more time to do investigations than you will have.

Support from the Field

My colleagues in other facilities were invaluable resources during the construction of our compliance program. They were always willing to help out and offer advice. In my two years in this field, I was never made to feel that my questions were trivial or that I was out of my depth in dealings with others in the field. Instead, I found much support and encouragement as I appealed to others for help.

Remember that HIM professionals who take on a compliance opportunity will need a few months to assess the volume of information that comes with the job. The information available is usually fairly reliable because most of it refers to the law or guideline that supports it. I finally settled on two magazines, three papers, and four professional associations. Fortunately, most continuing education hours can be counted in several of these associations.

An Opportunity for Growth

The demand for compliance officers will continue to grow as compliance moves into physician offices. I encourage HIM professionals to investigate all of these opportunities. Compliance officers often have diverse backgrounds, and each person brings their own expertise to the job while getting support from others. Motivation and assertiveness are critical. Be willing to research for legal support to resolve some issues, listen patiently, and respond to both petty and serious concerns. Above all, maintain confidentiality. The job can be a lonely one, but very rewarding.

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