

Embracing HIM Without Walls: HIM Professional Brings Skills to Ambulance Service

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By Chris Thorne Watanabe, RHIA

Editor's Note: The following is a first-person account of an HIM professional embracing the "HIM without walls" concept and working as a vice president at an emergency medical service company.

In 2012 I responded to a blind ad looking for someone with health information management (HIM) credentials. While I initially thought the position was for one of our local hospitals, I later learned it was for the Regional Emergency Medical Services Authority (REMSA) in Reno, NV. REMSA is a private, nonprofit ambulance authority providing paramedic ambulance services and emergency medical helicopter services to Washoe County. Working for an ambulance service wasn't my intended career path, but the decision has turned out to be the best career choice I've ever made.

Qualifications Can Be Learned

When I found out the position wasn't for an HIM director role, I really wasn't interested, but the company kept calling me for interviews. Every time I interviewed with someone, I told them I wasn't qualified or interested in the position. Undeterred, they continued to call. I proceeded to meet with a panel of interviewers and ultimately the CEO.

Despite my admonishments that I wasn't qualified, I was offered the position of vice president of business services and HIPAA officer at REMSA. As I learned over the first two years, ambulance billing is a skill that can be learned. But what I brought to the position is expertise that cannot be taught and that I gained as an HIM professional—mastery of processes, people, technology, and organization. Five years later I am still leading all the billing, revenue cycle, and HIPAA compliance efforts at REMSA. This article details my story.

Student to HIM Director to Vendor to Alternative Career

I first heard about HIM from my neighbor, who was an A.R.T., while in high school. Being pragmatic, I researched the profession to make sure I would be able to get a job and make money after college graduation.

First, I went to the library and checked out the occupational handbook. Next, I checked the job postings in the *Los Angeles Times*. Finally, I interviewed several HIM directors to learn more about their responsibilities. Each of the directors I interviewed was very honest, and shared the pros and cons of the job with me. From my perspective, the need for strong organizational skills was the most intriguing aspect of HIM. I was hooked. I was accepted into the Loma Linda University program, and graduated with a degree in medical records management in 1980.

In my first job out of school, I served as director of a 73-bed podiatric hospital, an entirely paper environment at the time. I worked there for 18 months, and in 1982 applied for a two-year leadership program offered by the hospital's owner. I was the only woman accepted into the program, which focused on managing every department within the organization. This course became a solid foundation for my future career expansion beyond HIM.

IT Opens the Door to Vendor Careers

After a few years at the podiatric hospital and a few stops along the way, I moved on to become the HIM director at Washoe Medical Center (WMC) in Reno, NV. Making the shift from a very small organization to very large one was initially challenging. I worked at WMC for 12 years, taking on more and more responsibility. I was ultimately responsible for tumor registry, case management, and pathology and radiology transcription, and was also involved in quality and the trauma registry.

As one of the first hospitals to implement document imaging in the 1990s, WMC received a lot of press for that accomplishment. I oversaw the installation of the system and participated in the organization's move to an enterprise-wide hospital information system (HIS).

Information technology (IT) is a natural place for HIM professionals because we understand both the practical and operational sides of systems. I believe that HIM is the bridge between IT and the rest of the world, because HIM professionals are linear thinkers. Like IT, they understand the organization, categories, and tables within a system.

After leaving WMC, I felt the need for a break from hospitals and spent the next decade working for vendors to implement and build IT systems. The transition from hospital to vendor was extremely difficult at first, for three reasons:

1. **Knowledge**—I had relied heavily on hospital customized software and had not learned standard word processing, Excel, and other programs. It took me some time to master these skills.
2. **Technical**—I went from being an expert to a worker bee, which was very difficult. I knew more about the subject matter than the technical aspects of the job.
3. **Social**—Working remotely was a challenge. I missed the camaraderie and companionship of an office.

I also helped my brother build his loan signing business to help relieve family pressures during that time. It was here that all my prior education and life experiences came together to enlighten my next career move—a return to HIM.

Back to HIM

Ironically, one of my clients with the loan signing business was the director of revenue cycle for St. Mary's Hospital in Reno, NV and a Loma Linda University graduate. That connection led to a full-time project: assessing the HIM department. When the HIM director eventually left, I was offered the position. With mixed feelings about returning to HIM management, I saw a plaque in the St. Mary's gift shop, which still hangs on my wall. It read: "Sometimes Right Back Where You Started From, Is Where You Belong."

I immediately took the director position, where I remained for almost three years. During my tenure, I achieved several significant accomplishments:

- Outsourced transcription
- Decreased outstanding coding from \$18 million to \$3 million
- Took the HIM department employee survey results from the worst to the highest rating in the hospital over the course of two years by improving processes, implementing incentives, and increasing morale

When St. Mary's was sold to a for-profit company, I decided to resign. And then I saw the blind ad for a vice president of business services at REMSA.

Recommendations for HIM Professionals Interested in Pursuing Nontraditional Careers

- Don't close the door on your HIM skills. Use those skills in a different way. It's just one more system to understand.
- You never know what your next opportunity may be—or how it will show up.
- Get out of your comfort zone. Pursue a knowledge base outside of HIM.
- Keep your feet in today and your eye on tomorrow.
- Where you need to take your department, also take yourself.
- Look to other HIM professionals to open the door to opportunities.
- Have people in your life who can answer questions about things you don't know.

From HIM to EMS: Ambulance Services Need HIM Skills

My ability to improve the employee survey results and my varied business experience were the biggest reasons REMSA was interested in hiring me for the position, according to the REMSA officials that hired me.

I have now been in this position for five years. I went from not knowing anyone in the field to being asked to speak at a user group meeting this year for one of our technology partners. I've learned about various types of revenue cycle software systems from major industry leading companies. While it took two years to master the job, the similarities to HIM are uncanny. For example, it demands organization and understanding categories—essentially the same principles as HIM, with tweaks. It was just one more system to understand.

Billing is basically like a conveyor belt. The bill is created and stays on a schedule, ultimately falling off at the end.

I now have much more balance in my life. My office is five minutes from home. I am community oriented and live my life at a slower pace. I plan to retire in the next two to three years.

Earlier this year I spent a weekend with my college friends from the Loma Linda HIM program. This is the 34th year we've gotten together for a weekend of margaritas and camaraderie. HIM friendships are a long-term career asset, no matter where the journey takes you.

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