

End of the Nontraditional Job: the Field Keeps Widening for the HIM Skill Set

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by Susan Parker, MEd, RHIA

Opportunities are increasing for HIM professionals looking to apply their skills in new ways and new settings. Making the fit clear to employers, though, can still require homework and a little translation.

One of the best things about being an HIM professional may well be the long-term diversity of the field. HIM practice and the need for the data management skills it embodies keep expanding. This is simply not a basement-bound, medical-record career anymore. HIM professionals understand the complexities of a data-driven society well beyond hospital walls.

HIM expertise now benefits law practices, pharmaceutical firms, clinical trial corporations, IT and healthcare vendors, biotech companies, and others. The list is endless. There is no longer such thing as “nontraditional” HIM practice. Clinical decision support systems, project management, and complex negotiations are daily HIM fare. Organizational skills, privacy and security expertise, policy development, and IT design teams are now mainstays of an HIM professional’s day-to-day work life.

However, HIM professionals can still be well-kept secrets in the larger employment pool. Communicating the value of an HIM background to those unfamiliar with our expertise can present a challenge, and doing the translating is usually up to you. If you are interested in exploring new work settings, the first step is knowing what you want in a career; the next is understanding what employers want in you. Then you must be able to articulate your HIM skills to those outside the immediate field and explain how they are a match.

Know Yourself

An important first step in successfully opening a new door is defining what you want. What is important to you?

Write a list of what you want. Be totally honest. Include both tangible and intangible goals. Consider your salary requirements, travel ability, whether you work best individually or as part of a team, your communication skills, leadership styles, values, and your personal goals. Beginning here will help you determine whether the new career you’re considering truly meets your needs or is simply an interesting daydream.

Research the Field

If—as many of us have—you have looked at a situation and thought “I could probably do that very well,” then look at “that” more closely. Sign up for online publications and e-bulletins in the related area. Read all you can on the field. Log on to the AHIMA Communities of Practice and look for members working in that setting; ask them to share their experiences.

As you learn about the field and its requirements, note where your training, skills, and ability cross over. For example, law offices can benefit from HIM knowledge in healthcare structure, the necessity of internal communication without breaching privacy, the intricacies of health information, and the policies and procedures designed around HIPAA regulations. A healthcare corporation with a consumer or corporate Web site can benefit from HIM experience in data systems, cross-functional communication, project management, and front-line use of online applications.

When researching a field, check the Web sites of organizations in your chosen area. Go to their career centers and read the job descriptions carefully. Notice what skills are needed, which ones you have, and which ones you need. Note abilities you

have acquired that could be applied in different ways. For instance, a director of business development for a technology vendor would apply his or her HIM background and real-world experience to help focus sales and marketing efforts.

Invest in Your Dream

If, after researching the field, you believe it is a good fit for you, research any special training you may need. It may be that you don't require any, but if you do, you can start to work on that additional credential. Or perhaps you'll need to get started on a formal academic program.

Professional meetings can be another wise investment. In your research, note conventions or regional meetings in the field. Consider attending selected sessions that may intersect with your background.

Meet Others

This is where the real stretch begins. You need to branch out and talk to people in the field. If possible, find a mentor. You may have to introduce yourself to strangers, but the connections you make can be very important to your goal. Contact people featured in articles and ask them about their field. If you attend meetings, network, which is a well-established, highly successful method of self-marketing. Be on the lookout for opportunities to talk with speakers and attendees. Vendors, too, are usually very helpful.

Plan your agenda before calling or walking up to introduce yourself. Do not ramble or expect the person to find you a job. The intent of your introduction is to make a contact, not a personal friend or inside recruiter. In your pursuit of a new path, do not be so driven that you forget to hear what you are told. Listen to the advice you receive. Continue to assess your goal with your ability.

Leverage Your Contact

When you feel you have sufficient understanding and skill to be hired, contact the people you've met who are in a position to help you get a job. Consider contacting a recruiter—they are often well connected in different fields and can help translate between them. Clearly state your goals and be as flexible as you can—you are entering a new field and being rigid will not serve you well. Contact the vendors, speakers, or participants you have met at meetings and make them aware of your interest and availability. Ask them about openings they may have heard about. This is not the time to be shy.

Tailor Your Résumé

Once you have a lead, tailor your résumé to the position you are seeking. Describe your HIM experience relevant to the position. Do not expect the reader to make the leap; it is your responsibility to lead him or her there.

Further, as you frame your HIM experience in the requirements of the new field, be certain to do so in that field's language. This is an important point. You must be aware of language differences and be the translator—do not expect your reader to do this. If you must use HIM terminology, explain it. Describe your skills and experience in words familiar to the reader and specific to his or her needs.

Go for It

Applying your HIM skills to a new setting can be a relatively simple transition. More ambitious leaps can provide a new and invigorating challenge. Take a close look at the competencies expected of new HIM graduates. Expand your thinking beyond the tasks themselves and look at the attributes needed to do your job. There is a proliferation of new fields in need of our skills; we have to present our HIM skills accordingly. Remember, we are well-prepared, respected professionals in the healthcare arena—other fields value our expertise, too, even if they may not know it yet.

Name: Linda Elder, RHIA

Job title: Clinical research assistant, Blood and Marrow Transplant Program

Employer: Stanford University, School of Medicine

What are your current job responsibilities?

Abstract clinical data from medical records; ensure data quality and develop and improve data management systems; coordinate and monitor trials for patient eligibility and compliance to protocol parameters.

What traditional HIM skills do you use in your job?

Knowledge in anatomy and physiology, disease processes, and medical terminology; understanding how information is collected and where to find it in medical records; knowledge in patient confidentiality, medicolegal issues, and HIPAA regulations; forms design for accurate data capture.

What new (non-HIM) skills did you need to learn?

Fundamentals of clinical trials processes, especially FDA regulatory issues.

What was your biggest challenge in making the transition to your new job?

Lack of exposure to the world of clinical trials research. Employers were looking specifically for experience in this setting. There seemed to be reluctance to hire from the "outside."

How did you meet that challenge?

I spoke with people who worked in drug development and medical device companies. I learned about available resources and organizations devoted to clinical trials, and took additional courses. I'm taking advantage of training that Stanford offers in clinical research trials.

Name: Tamara Piña, RHIA

Job title: Health information administrator

Employer: Wyle Laboratories, a contractor for NASA. I work at the Johnson Space Center Flight Medicine Clinic.

What are your current job responsibilities?

Maintain the integrity of the medical records of astronauts and their families as well as many other medically related space-flight records. Responsibilities vary greatly depending on the project at hand. **What traditional HIM skills do you use in your job?**

Knowledge management and data integrity skills; keeping records uniformly regardless of content; developing workflows to get the information where it needs to be.

What new (non-HIM) skills did you need to learn?

Project management (which I believe is a missing link in our education).

What was your biggest challenge in making the transition to your new job?

I am the first records manager in this very unique environment. We do not bill for services, work with insurance companies, or code for reimbursement. In a traditional setting, those tasks drive many policies and processes.

How did you meet that challenge?

I called everybody I knew in the profession! Once I realized that I was on the same page as those that I considered my mentors, it gave me confidence. I'm looking into project management programs to get more formalized education in this area.

Name: Michael Sanchez, CCA

Job title: Senior reimbursement analyst

Employer: Guidant Corporation

What are your current job responsibilities?

Helping customers understand and disseminate Medicare and other third-party payer policies regarding coverage, coding, and payment of investigational devices and new clinical applications. Interact with patient accounts, chargemaster, compliance, and electrophysiology lab personnel. Customer education through in-person presentations and written materials.

What traditional HIM skills do you use in your job?

Procedural and diagnostic coding used for internal cost analysis, budgeting, and contracting. Electronic claim form guidance to aid customers' implementation of Medicare required modifiers, revenue codes, and nomenclature specific to FDA-approved clinical trials.

What new (non-HIM) skills did you need to learn?

More in-depth clinical knowledge of implantable cardiac device therapy relative to heart failure, sudden cardiac death, and other problematic cardiac arrhythmias.

What was your biggest challenge in making the transition to your new job?

To quickly learn the intricate details of the Medicare's new Outpatient Prospective Payment System to include APCs, device pass-through payments, and status indicators. Establishing trustworthiness with customers.

How did you meet that challenge?

Preparing for certifications in coding and compliance, including a broad-based focus on hospital- and physician-based

payment systems and practices; broadening business skills to include strategic planning, economics, and finance through the completion of MA degree.

Name: Susan Lahti, RHIA

Job title: Medical paralegal

Employer: Hinshaw and Culbertson, LLP

What are your current job responsibilities?

Assessing personal injury, product liability, and insurance claims; working to acquire pertinent medical documentation, including research materials, for appropriate work-up and handling of each claim. Assist in case preparation up to and through trial proceedings.

What traditional HIM skills do you use in your job?

My familiarity with medical record content and departmental processes, including release of information, have been invaluable. The detailed knowledge of disease processes and procedures necessary for accurate coding has been extremely helpful.

What new (non-HIM) skills did you need to learn?

Familiarity with application of the law, legal terminology, and legal procedures.

What was your biggest challenge in making the transition to your new job?

Convincing employers I am capable of meeting their needs; educating others about the wide variety of skills possessed by persons employed in the HIM field.

How did you meet that challenge?

Enrollment in college courses; steady and tenacious work and application of my skills; anticipating and working to meet the needs of my employer in each individual case.

Name: Neil Langley, RHIA, PMP

Job title: Project manager, physician credentialing

Employer: Ardent Health Services

What are your current job responsibilities?

Software deployment (80 percent travel) to enable project planning, execution, monitoring, and closing down of each project once completed, including lessons learned.

What traditional HIM skills do you use in your job?

Current-state workflow analysis; future-state automated workflow analysis and validation.

What new (non-HIM) skills did you need to learn?

Project management, as taught and supported by the Project Management Institute.

What was your biggest challenge in making the transition to your new job?

Learning to master the precise communication with which ideas and information must be exchanged with technical people in a technical environment.

How did you meet that challenge?

Balancing business with professional needs (e.g., 2004 AHIMA Convention offered new insights into applied technology while meeting my obligations to HIM); knowing that I wanted to become a project manager, in part because the market is focused on that skill; PMP certification.

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Article citation:

Parker, Susan. "The End of the Nontraditional Job: The Field Keeps Widening for the HIM Skill Set." *Journal of AHIMA* 76, no.5 (May 2005): 38-40.

