

Exploring IT Opportunities for HIM Professionals

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by Christine L. Benson, RHIT

Medical records have traditionally housed a patient's health history, but they also hold the statistical information that enables healthcare facilities to determine patient care trends and guides administrators to project future demand of services. As a result, the need for more information, accurate information, and faster access to that information is clear.

Using technology can increase health information access while keeping it secure and maintaining high standards. To improve health information access, those who have dedicated their professional careers to managing this information must be involved. The opportunity to make a career change from HIM to IT allowed me to redirect the experience I gained in HIM and subsequently use my knowledge to enhance health information access through the use of information technology.

Recognizing an Opportunity

The competitive nature of healthcare today requires organizations to be innovative and progressive. At Genesis Health System, information was targeted as a competitive strategy to ensure that we were meeting all of our patients' needs. In the initial phase of the information overhaul, re-engineering the medical record was a major factor.

For many years, HIM professionals have been battling the never-ending war of miscellaneous papers. An incomplete chart with missing data can result in substandard coding, which may lead to decreased reimbursement. Patient information buried in a stack of papers cannot be reproduced for requests received from healthcare providers, insurance companies, and the legal community. As an operations supervisor, I found managing the paper process to be a daily challenge. In the end, the patient was the loser.

To find innovative ways to deal with the paper process and to enhance access to patient information, we identified a document imaging solution as one of two specific technologies to meet the goal. Inspired to solve the problems of the paper world, I readily accepted the project management responsibilities. Pioneering a project that would change the lives of physicians, end users, and the staff whose livelihoods had depended on health information was an exciting challenge.

Uniting HIM and IT Skills

A team approach is vital to successfully implementing a state-of-the-art information system. Our document imaging project team consisted of:

- a technician responsible for network, hardware setup, and management
- an interface specialist to design electronic feeds from third-party applications
- a database administrator to monitor and manage the enormous database critical to the system's integrity
- a technical services manager to provide leadership
- an administrator responsible for the HIM and IT departments

Although IT and HIM work together to serve customers' needs, there are cultural differences between the departments. As technology continues to offer better and faster ways to do things, IT staff is challenged on a daily basis to keep up with the most innovative technology. At times, software is so new that it may not be totally developed and it is up to IT staff to test the application, report bugs, and apply new fixes until it performs as expected. Work plans are continuously adjusted to meet the goals of a project. It is important to be flexible yet determined when faced with the challenges of implementing a new technology.

On the other hand, HIM functions are fairly consistent. For example, the process a coder uses to assign codes has not changed significantly over time. While the codes themselves change with new updates each year, the process basically stays the same. Staff become accustomed to a daily routine and take comfort in their familiar settings.

The electronic medical record is not just an image of the paper record; it is a working record that enables multiple-user access to any chart at any time and provides physician completion functions online. Workflow allows users to route charts and also allows restrictions to access based on physician association or by a user's need to know.

As an HIM professional, I brought a career of health information experience to the document imaging team. The application of traditional workflow, security, and medical record requirements drive the development phases and result in a legal electronic health record. With a background in analysis, coding, and release of information, I understood the elements necessary to move from a paper to electronic forum. Experience and knowledge in confidentiality issues to keep a patient's most private information secure is vital. Finally, established relationships with physicians and other end users and the knowledge of how each person uses the medical record provides insight to the look and feel of an computerized record. The ability to bring the strengths of each project team member together to make all the pieces fall into place is the key to the success of the project.

Greater Responsibility, Interesting Challenges

Once the document imaging project was up and running, my project manager role evolved into system administration. I served as the first point of contact for end-user glitches and HIM system issues. As the health system continues to roll out document imaging to additional sites, I assist the team with HIM-specific activities to prepare for the electronic conversion. The experience of project management and system administration has paved the way for administering additional HIM-related applications.

Along with document imaging, I now consult on and participate in the development of other HIM-related software applications. My facility is preparing to manage a data repository for a multifacility organization, and I can offer insight into pertinent data fields to assist in establishing a unique patient identifier throughout the health system. This repository will also identify duplicate patient numbers within the master patient index. As system administrator, I also assist in transcription and dictation efforts. It is beneficial to have a single individual involved in the basic functions of systems that complement each other and serve a common purpose. For example, the interface between an electronic record solution and a transcription system demonstrates the dependence of each technology in maintaining patient information. Misunderstandings can arise regarding system functionality and outcomes, but if an individual is involved in the operation of both systems, such problems are greatly diminished. Finally, I serve as an intermediary between vendors and end users to resolve problems in the hospital operating system and in a release of information tracking system.

Making It Work

Change can be unsettling to some HIM staff. When implementing new technology to replace an old process, HIM staff are confronted with new skills and ideas. The best approach is demonstrate the new technology's effectiveness. Allow hands-on learning to promote a sense of accomplishment. Let the staff become the experts and let them assist in testing the application where appropriate.

Through the process of product implementation, it is important that HIM and IT staff work together. IT staff may understand the functionality of a product, but it is vital that end users communicate their needs to ensure the application's viability. Encourage interaction between HIM and IT staff to gain understanding of each person's role. Allow HIM staff to attend development meetings with the project team to share HIM responsibilities with the IT team. Knowledge is key to promoting a cohesive environment between HIM and IT.

The benefits of operating a high-profile technological HIM department include the opportunity to attain the highest quality in terms of process and the finished product. Automation enables HIM management to redirect resources and increase the productivity of skilled staff. HIM employees gain a greater sense of accomplishment and pride in their work. Once accustomed to the new electronic process, HIM staff can offer suggestions for process and quality improvement. In short, providing a link from the technical team members to the end user is crucial to the success of any information system.

IT experience can open doors to new opportunities for HIM professionals. The skills acquired through implementing and managing a new technology can heighten professional and personal goals. This experience is extremely valuable as our world increases its reliance on information technology as a way to share health information across the continuum of care.

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