Focus on the Future: Environmental Scan Illuminates the Path Ahead for HIM

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By Anna Desai, MHA

Whether planning a summer vacation or the direction of a new business, one must consider the larger external environment. Consider a trip to the grocery store. You'd like to get this done as quickly as possible. You run into some traffic. There's been an accident on the road you usually take to get to the store. What do you do? You decide to take an alternate route that will keep you out of the traffic jam. This decision is an example of a limited form of environmental scanning.

In today's healthcare environment, change is a source of both opportunities and potential threats. The success and longevity of any organization depends upon the ability to adapt quickly to such changes. Organizations with a focus on the future develop planning processes that take into account the "big picture"-the macro environmental dynamics that ultimately drive, influence, and shape the strategy and goals of a company, business, or industry. Successful environmental scanning requires continuous monitoring and acquiring of information that helps organization representatives to identify and interpret potential trends and priorities.

An effective environmental scanning program allows individuals to understand current and potential changes taking place in the environment. The results of this activity include fostering an understanding of the effects of change on organizations, support for forecasting, and awareness of expected changes as a component of the decision making process. "Environmental scanning is essential if we are to lead our organizations into a rapidly changing future," says John Sena, PhD, professor at Ohio State University. "It is axiomatic to me that the longer we have to prepare for a change, the better we will probably be able to manage it.

"Healthcare must be more proactive in anticipating the future."

The Envisioning Collaborative at Work

The House of Delegates (HoD), a deliberative assembly comprised of delegates from each of AHIMA's 52 Component State Associations (CSAs), and the AHIMA Board of Directors have been actively involved with environmental scanning for the health information management (HIM) profession. The HoD works year-round advocating for the profession, the members, and the association. These leaders have been instrumental in contributing and vetting trends and issues affecting health information management.

The Envisioning Collaborative, under the HoD, is comprised of delegates, subject matter experts, and industry leaders. Members of the Envisioning Collaborative are responsible for conducting scanning activities and trend reporting throughout the year. The result is an environmental scan report that is distributed to the Board of Directors and CSAs twice a year. The report includes discussions from the HoD meetings and with other subject matter groups, such as AHIMA's HIM Practice Excellence team and HIM industry experts, offering a more collaborative approach to the scanning process.

"We have taken and utilized the ideas of our team and put them to work," says Vicki Delgado, RHIT, CTR, co-chair of the Envisioning Collaborative. The report offers an analysis of HIM issues and trends impacting and influencing the profession and healthcare. "We are working toward building a strong future for our profession, building in a direction that will ensure our continued success and growth inside and outside of healthcare," Delgado says. Currently in its fourth edition, the environmental scan report is updated on a bi-annual basis, providing timely and meaningful information that can be used by AHIMA for strategic planning.

Environmental Scan Results

Earlier this year, the environmental scan report was utilized during the annual review of AHIMA's strategic planning session. The report helped inform the objectives and tactics needed to uphold the association's direction and to shape AHIMA's 2014-2017 Strategic Plan. For more information on AHIMA's strategic plan, visit www.ahima.org/about/Strategy.aspx.

The Environmental Scan report is organized into five categories essential to the HIM environment:

- Business/economic climate trends
- Demographic trends
- Legislation/regulation trends
- Political/social value trends
- Technology/science trends

The following provides a summary of the January 2013 report's findings from the 2014-2017 Strategic Plan. The plan contains a modified summary that stemmed from the HoD environmental scan report.

Business/Economic Climate Trends

The business/economic climate trends category covers economic forces-such as income, expenditures, and resources-that affect the cost of running a business. Examples of this category include the rise of unemployment rates and the need for pricing transparency brought on by consumerism demand.

Budget Constraints

Organizational expenses continue to rise while healthcare budgets decrease, with cost containment efforts creating HIM staffing and workforce challenges. Departments proposing projects must provide a return on investment and justify spending.

Data Integrity

HIM professionals are accountable to ensure quality data for patient safety, statistical and analytical reporting, and reimbursement uses. It is increasingly challenging to monitor and manage the integrity of data due to volume, variety, and velocity of data sources both internal and external to organizations.

Efficiency Requirements

Budget constraints and reimbursement changes are forcing many organizations to find efficiencies through technology, consolidation, or staffing adjustments. Reductions in personnel now require staff to be more agile, bringing in more skills and flexibility to meet changing needs.

Reimbursement Changes

There will be increased pressure on the timeliness and accuracy of coding and billing as the focus on quality data, documentation, and quality of care reporting drive reimbursement. These changes affect the bottom line, making it even more difficult for organizations and departments to forecast and budget necessary services, projects, and activities.

Unfunded Mandates

Increased regulatory requirements demand an investment of resources to implement and affect hospital departments' processes and work flow. Government officials are requiring audits without providing additional funds to help defray the cost of preparing for visits by various bodies, such as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Demographic Trends

This category includes the population of members and prospective members-specifically, changes in their attitudes and behavior toward the kinds of value AHIMA offers. It is also necessary to understand the customer's environment-the priorities

and forces driving attitudes and behavior.

Aging Membership, Workforce Population

It is estimated that approximately 6,000 new HIM workers are needed each year to fill new positions and replace those who retire or leave the field. While older members are retiring, the profession has been slow to replace and prepare younger members and early careerists to fill their vacant spots. Engaging the younger generation and mid-careerists will require the use of new avenues of communication as well as providing information in ways that support instant gratification.

Globalization-Access to Information

People around the world are gaining more education and exposure to new ideas and information, creating communities with others who share similar interests or expertise. Businesses can collaborate virtually without regard to location or time zones. To support this level of increased access, information must be managed in new ways, including better consolidation of data and meta-tagging for searchability. Communities must be fostered virtually (i.e., social media) to attract new members and expertise.

Population Health Management

Information can now be made more widely available for a broader range of uses than ever before. Government agencies are capitalizing on this availability to identify trends in the occurrence, prevalence, and management of health conditions. Quality and accuracy of health information will make it easier to measure changes in population health over time.

Waning Volunteerism

Decreased budgets and an unwillingness of employers to accommodate continuing education time and expenses make it challenging for members to become involved and fully participate in professional development and volunteer activities. Without member engagement, it will become more difficult to manage member expectations and leverage expertise.

Moving Offshore

Outsourcing and offshoring HIM jobs have risen in response to the healthcare industry's need to perform services more economically-seasoned professionals cost money. These methods can help control costs, but may lead to less perceived necessity for HIM as a profession. Relying on individuals that don't have the same training as experienced HIM professionals may have an impact on patient safety and even drive up costs if coding and reimbursement best practices are not consistently followed.

Employer and Patient Empowerment

Employers are increasingly requiring providers to add more value at the same cost. This includes setting up bundled payment agreements with large systems and requiring more coordination and documentation of care. Patients, too, are becoming increasingly aware of available data on patient safety, satisfaction, or other rankings, leading to greater choice than ever before.

Legislation/Regulation Trends

This category consists of the restrictions that state and federal laws place on individuals and organizations with regard to the conduct of activities. Examples of this category include changes in rules and regulations affecting the HIM profession, such as the Affordable Care Act and its implications.

ACO Changes

Accountable care organizations (ACOs) are being developed more widely than ever before, requiring new methods for information exchange and increasing the need for quality data to ensure effective and coordinated patient care. While many unknowns remain, ACO changes and implementations are a high priority for HIM in 2013 and beyond as the industry learns how data will be managed, shared, and protected by ACOs.

Big Data

Managing the upcoming torrent of data from hospitals and other care settings, clinical trials, and health information exchanges (HIE) will place a heavy burden on the HIM profession. As Big Data is becoming a higher priority with both government agencies and businesses, HIM professionals play an integral role in determining whether their organizations can embrace Big Data and use it in an effective and meaningful way.

Longitudinal Coordination of Care

Focus is increasingly being placed on long-term and post-acute care settings to improve outcomes while decreasing hospital readmissions. Longitudinal coordination of care has become a vital strategy as reimbursement methodologies change. Value-based purchasing, bundling of payments, and accountable care organizations are prime examples of the changing payment landscape-driving the need for effective sharing of information across the care continuum.

E-Discovery

Advances in technology and new regulations make it difficult to follow traditional paper-based methods governing legal discovery. E-discovery brings many more complexities and requires new precedents to be set, and will become a high priority for HIM as more states adopt e-discovery rules and regulations governing the uses and disclosures of electronic records data.

Healthcare Reform

Healthcare reform will boost the need for highly trained and continually educated HIM professionals in the near future. Another change will be the tying of reimbursement to quality of care requirements. Payments to hospitals will be partly based on readmission rates and patient satisfaction scores as well as other data-driven outcomes measures. This will require the monitoring and reporting of quality, and provide an opportunity for new HIM leadership roles.

Private Payers Focus on Quality

Although the Affordable Care Act only directly impacted Medicare and Medicaid by tying payments to quality, private payers are following suit, accelerating a shift in incentives from previous volume-driven methods to the value that is created and the ability of providers to keep patients healthy and out of acute care settings. The risk ends up being placed on hospitals to absorb the cost of patients who are frequently admitted.

Political/Social Value Trends

This category includes social and cultural issues that are affecting the association's opportunities and shaping members' desire for, and attitudes toward, the value offered by AHIMA. An example of this category can include emerging new roles and opportunities for HIM professionals brought on by the changing needs and priorities of healthcare organizations.

Need for Engaged Members

Human capital is always in great demand, including educated members who bring diverse and specialized experiences to elevate and advocate for the HIM profession. Engaged members lend a voice to change and help set a good example within their own environments.

Attracting New Professionals

Growing demands of the profession are opening doors to diverse job opportunities. However, studies indicate a lack of qualified individuals to fill these new roles. The HIM profession risks losing credentialed positions to those without credentials and to other professions if training opportunities don't exist to help students and members adequately prepare for emerging roles.

Declining CSA Member Participation

Today's busy work environment makes it challenging for members to volunteer and participate in professional development activities. Some CSAs have had to rotate their leadership to keep their positions filled. However, to remain competitive in today's job market, the networking and quality educational opportunities that associations provide are more relevant than ever.

Competition with Other Healthcare Professionals

HIM professionals are competing with other professions like information technology (IT) and nursing for similar positions in leadership, quality, compliance, and information privacy and security. While organizations now favor moving toward a multidisciplinary approach over traditional silos to accomplish work, there are challenges and opportunities ahead for HIM to be part of the conversation and remain as the subject matter experts in health information.

Repurposing Jobs

The shift from paper to electronic systems has created a dramatic change in jobs and duties. Additionally, employers are learning how to do more with less, causing some positions to be reevaluated and redesigned. Today's workforce requires individuals to become agile and continuously review current competencies, identify gaps and opportunities, and be open to developing more advanced skill sets to remain relevant and competitive.

Decision Support

Executives and managers are increasingly being asked to justify decisions and priorities to make the best use of limited resources. This creates a need for clinical and non-clinical decision support systems-such as pricing, risk/return, predictive modeling, and trend analysis-and thus causes executives to rely on the expertise of HIM professionals to ensure they have all the information needed and in a usable format. HIM professionals need to be part of data strategy to help design systems to support these needs.

Technology, Science Trends

New developments in science and technology help to collect, store, share, and manage health information.

Communication Quickly Changing

Social media and portable devices like smartphones and tablets-with downloadable apps-have the ability to revolutionize the HIM profession in ways not yet fully realized. More opportunities to communicate using a variety of different methods and tools will help members and consumers seek advice and gain knowledge.

Computer-Assisted Coding Growing

Computer-assisted coding (CAC) will dramatically change the way medical records are reviewed and coded, and will greatly affect professionals with a CCA or CCS credential who primarily code. This new technology will open opportunities for HIM professionals to be involved with assessing, planning, and implementing CAC technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Natural Language Processing and Understanding

Natural language processing and understanding technologies built into EHRs are helping to improve functionality by enabling effective use of dictation and voice recognition, as well as the capture and use of data in CAC programs. They will increasingly be used to pull together disparate parts of the electronic health record to create the full patient story.

Electronic Health Records Need Better Standards

To support information exchange, EHRs must present data in standardized ways, and separate organizations providing services for the same patient need to share information securely. HIM professionals have opportunities to become experts and lead EHR implementation and interoperability efforts.

Fostering Health Information Exchange

The establishment of health information exchange in the US is revolutionizing how information is exchanged and delivered, but the real question in the coming years is how to actually exchange the information-rather than defining what an exchange is. ACOs and patient care will be enhanced and accelerated through interoperability, but there must be significant controls on privacy and security. It is crucial to ensure that data exchanged is complete, accurate, and timely.

Privacy and Security Changing

There are continuous and increasing challenges as laws, rules, and regulations governing privacy and security of health information become more sophisticated and complex. HIM professionals must ensure systems are secure, patient privacy is always protected, and the HIM profession remains at the forefront of these changes.

As accessibility and security become the top priorities, privacy may be assumed, but HIM professionals will be the ones behind the scenes making this assumption a certainty.

Mobility Provides New Challenges, Opportunities

Mobile access will also provide new challenges and opportunities and require trained HIM professionals to take the lead. Access will not be limited to health data systems, but also available to patients through their personal health records and possibly through the onset of mobile applications. Consumer education is required so patients know how to access their information and know that the information can be trusted and used by professionals no matter where they are.

Planning for HIM's Future

Environmental scanning has an important part to play in the strategic planning process for any organization. It offers an objective review of the current and anticipated factors that can impact and inform what an organization, a specific profession, or an overall industry needs today and tomorrow. Investing the time to conduct ongoing scanning allows leaders to comprehensively cover the environments, discuss implications, and-where appropriate-plan a course of action.

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