

Fresh Perspective on HIM: Recent Graduates Embrace Field's Opportunities

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by Gina Rollins

HIM professionals have always relished the challenges and benefits of this exciting profession and the field's newest members are no exception. The Journal talked to several recent graduates about their experiences so far.

HIM is a field that offers ample personal and professional rewards and almost complete flexibility to craft a career that accommodates one's interests and desired work setting. Other positives identified by those new to the profession: the ability to be involved in something that affects lives and improves care and plenty of recognition for a job well done. All those benefits spell a bright and promising future for HIM students, and indeed, the field itself. In this article, we learn how—and why—recent graduates are embracing the profession.

Different Every Day

"It's quite a diverse field, and whatever your particular interest, you can find a niche in HIM," says Lance Smith, RHIT, administrative manager of health information management services at St. Luke's Cornwall Hospital in Newburgh, NY. "It's a profession you'll never get bored in. There's always something new."

Smith is a newcomer to HIM, having passed his RHIT examination in July 2001. One of the last graduates of the AHIMA independent study program, he completed his studies while working in the field. Like many, he found the profession almost by accident. Armed with a bachelor's degree in public administration, he planned a career in government, but responded to an ad for a medical record secretary at a small community hospital.

"I got the job. That got me into all kinds of things, and it whetted my appetite," he recalls. Today, Smith oversees day-to-day operations and is involved in quality and record reviews and statistical analyses. He's also an unabashed HIM fan. "I love it. I've finally figured out what I wanted to do when I grew up," he says.

Smith is not alone in finding HIM after he pursued other career options. A chronic knee problem made it impossible for G. Lee Daggs, RHIA, to continue working as a warehouse manager. In searching for a new career, he heard about the HIA program at East Central University in Ada, OK. "At first, I had no idea what it was, but when I researched it, I realized there were more jobs than people to fill them. I was also interested in science, computers, and business, and it felt like a good choice for me," he says.

Upon graduating in June 2002, Daggs became director of health information and privacy officer at Morton County Health System in Elkhart, KS, a 100-bed facility in the southwestern corner of the state. Responsible for overall management of the HIM department, inpatient coding, preparation of various reports and statistical analyses, HIPAA compliance, and supervision of transcription, he too has found a home in HIM. "I really enjoy my job. It's a challenge, but I feel I'm making a difference in people's lives and I'm doing something different every day."

A Spectrum of Options

The diversity of career options is a theme repeated often by professionals new to the field. After graduating in 1998 from the HIA program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Elizabeth Fonseca, RHIA, initially worked as a manager in a hospital HIM department. Over time, she discovered her interests lay elsewhere, and two years ago she became quality improvement analyst at MacNeal Health Network in Berwyn, IL. Fonseca develops and uses databases to analyze patient outcomes,

identify opportunities to improve processes, and complete special projects that have patient care implications. "I love what I'm doing. I wouldn't change anything. This is one of the most creative alternatives to traditional HIM roles," she says.

Paradoxically, the very diversity of options in HIM may cause some students to question their career prospects. "When students come here, they ask 'will I have a job?' But they probably have some of the best opportunities," Fonseca says. "It may just be the economy, but I think some of it too is comparing HIM to other professions. If someone goes into nursing or becomes an attorney, it's more clear what they will do when they graduate. But with HIM, they can go into so many areas."

In the view of some new graduates, HIM professionals are selling themselves short by not fully exploring all career options. "I'm afraid there are seasoned professionals who are running their departments well but aren't branching out. Opportunities will be missed and other people will assume roles that HIM [professionals] could do," says Katherine Downing, RHIA, director of patient privacy for HCA in Nashville, TN. Among the positions she believes HIM professionals should be pursuing are chief privacy officer, risk manager, and chief operating officer.

Downing graduated from the Ohio State University HIA program in 1995. She had clinical internships at both Duke University Medical Center and HCA and subsequently had job offers from both. She chose HCA and has been with the company ever since. In her current position for two years, she has helped oversee implementation of HCA's HIPAA privacy program, with responsibilities ranging from executing policies and conducting privacy audits at local facilities to training both local and divisional privacy officers.

Education After Graduation

Downing's work is an example of the changing nature of HIM, which must keep pace with both technological innovations and legal and regulatory mandates. Despite entering the field during such a turbulent time, new professionals generally believe they've been well prepared to take on whatever challenges appear. Still, most wish they'd learned a little more in one or more areas of the field. Some of the areas cited include management skills like delegation and time management, more exposure to the use of data in quality improvement, and legal considerations in HIM.

Regardless of the subject matter, many newly graduated professionals continue to view their alma maters as resources. An example is Cynthia Stroud, RHIT, a 1998 graduate of the HIT program at Cincinnati State Community College. Stroud is protected health information coordinator at St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Edgewood, KY. "I feel comfortable contacting the school and doing networking to get answers and problem solve," she says.

A nontraditional student who had a career as a wife and mother before pursuing HIM, Stroud sits on the privacy steering committee at St. Elizabeth, serves as the organization's privacy contact, trains staff about HIPAA compliance, manages information release and the neonatal registry, and supervises medical records clerks. Like many other new graduates, she is working toward further academic credentials, and is a senior in the HIA program at Northern Kentucky University.

Wanted: More Students

Many HIM professionals are adding a task to their job description: bring new people into the profession. "Every single one of us needs to advertise the profession and be our own best advocates, because high school counselors won't do it for us," says Downing.

"We need more awareness in high schools," agrees Rosemary Yerushalmi, RHIA. "There's still a lot of people who aren't aware of the field." Yerushalmi recently stopped short when she saw an HIM student being interviewed on a Spanish channel program. "I was glued to the television. It was the first time I'd seen anything like it," she recalls.

A 1997 graduate of the HIA program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Yerushalmi worked in the long-term care industry for four years before joining Advocate Bethany Hospital in Chicago in 2000 as a data analysis coordinator. There, she collects and analyzes data and prepares reports for both internal needs and external requirements, such as public health statistics. In addition, as systems manager for the utilization review database, Yerushalmi assigns passcodes and trains coworkers to use the system.

If her greatest professional challenge is making data meaningful and understandable to colleagues, her greatest reward is positive feedback from colleagues. "I get a lot of compliments that I did a good job. It's really rewarding to be acknowledged,"

she says.

Beyond Compensation

It is that sense of having made a difference to colleagues, and more importantly, patients, that carries HIM professionals through any day-to-day frustrations. “We’re not involved in the direct care of patients, but without our proper handling of information, the care of patients is impacted. Our scope of practice is very important,” says Stroud.

As Daggs discovered, HIM also plays a pivotal role in the financial health of organizations. When he arrived at Morton County, the inpatient coding backlog exceeded \$500,000, and outpatient services wasn’t much better. Today, inpatient coding is current, and there is only about an \$80,000 backlog for outpatient care, he reports.

For their efforts, professionals new to the field believe they are generally well compensated, but most would like to earn a little more. According to Downing, coding positions are the most competitive, while other areas of HIM lag behind comparable functions like risk management.

With virtually unlimited opportunities, graduating HIM students have the luxury of charting their own career paths. The message from practicing colleagues: take full advantage of it. “Think about your true interest, even it’s nontraditional. Don’t feel that you have to be boxed in as a coder or just regular HIM,” says Downing. “Never think you’re limited,” agrees Fonseca. “Keep an open mind.”

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