

From Coder to Knowledge Engineer

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by Anne Zender, MA, director of communications

“Find a job that really holds your interest and one that will challenge you. If you’re not challenged daily, there’s something wrong.”

—Judy Sample, RHIT, CCS, knowledge engineer
at Inference Systems International, Inc.

Combining her interests in coding and technology, Judy Sample, RHIT, CCS, has more than just an interesting job. She believes her work is moving her profession forward—one code at a time.

Sample is a knowledge engineer at Inference Systems International, Inc. Her company is developing a Web-based coding product that reads dictated reports from hospital settings and assigns codes to them.

Part of Sample’s job is writing rules that identify medical terms and attaching corresponding ICD-9-CM codes to them. The software recognizes the language in the dictation and assigns codes based on the information in the rules. That means, Sample says, the rules must represent all the possible terms a physician could use in describing a condition or diagnosis.

“As we know, our physicians have their own unique ways of describing things,” Sample says. She works with hospitals to determine possible terms a clinician might use. “For example, they could use ‘diabetes mellitus,’ ‘diabetes,’ or just ‘D.M.,’” she says. It’s her job to identify as many possible terms as she can and keep them updated appropriately as medical knowledge changes.

In addition, Sample’s role as coding manager requires her to perform comparative studies and auditing to test the program’s accuracy. The company expects to roll out the product this summer, she says.

Making the Switch

For Sample, working for her current company has been a three-year journey, she says. The journey began when a friend of Sample’s was hired by the same company four years ago. “I was getting burned out after 11 years of working in a hospital,” says Sample. “And I figured if it didn’t work out, I could always go back to coding.”

She applied for a job and made the switch. “It was scary, but I was glad to make the change,” she says.

In her previous roles, Sample had worked as a hospital inpatient/outpatient coder, as well as a team leader. Although she uses her coding knowledge daily in her current job, she still likes to occasionally pinch-hit as a coder for a local hospital. “It gets into your blood,” she says of her coding work. “I’m glad I didn’t have to leave it completely.”

Compared to her past, today Sample finds herself in a different work environment. She works from her home in Georgia and visits her company’s office in Florida monthly. Though she enjoys working at home, she says one of her biggest challenges is keeping up to date with new procedures and code changes. She stays current by keeping in touch with coding colleagues, attending local and state meetings, and “reading *Coding Clinic* like a novel,” she says.

Building a Better Future

Sample believes her work is helping to build a better future for her coding colleagues. “I see the need for quicker, more accurate coding,” she says. In the light of the coder shortage, she says, coders may find themselves with responsibilities beyond coding. This makes it difficult to keep up with the work load and stay productive. “I believe that our product will give coders additional time to do the other things they need to do,” Sample says.

What does Sample like about her job? Most notably, she likes being part of “a product that I know is going to help my profession,” she says. “It’s good to be on the edge of something new.”

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Driving the Power of Knowledge

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