

HIM Roads Less Traveled

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by Michele Hogan

Increasingly, HIM professionals are taking unique roads in their professional lives—into other care settings and into boardrooms, classrooms, and more. How have their work lives changed? Four who chose less traveled roads tell their stories here.

When poet Robert Frost wrote about "the road less traveled" he didn't have HIM in mind specifically—but the phrase continues to resound for AHIMA members decades later. Increasingly, HIM professionals are taking less traveled roads in their careers—out of the hospital and into other care settings, as well as classrooms, boardrooms, and more. How did they get there? We spoke with four trailblazing members to find out how they made the transition.

Elaine Yaggie: "I Had to Determine if This Had a Chance to Succeed"

When the road to traditional advancement closed to Elaine Yaggie, RHIA, early in her career, she decided to pave her own way and be her own navigator. Today, she's president of Northern Minnesota Medical Records Services, a company she started more than a decade ago. She also runs another company, Minnesota Medical Record Services. Combined, the companies serve nearly 70 facilities and employ more than 80 people in three states.

Yaggie got into this role shortly after graduating from college and returning to the medical records department of the hospital where she worked, seeking a new challenge. She sought a risk management position there, but was turned down. When she approached hospital management with the idea of starting a transcription service as an auxiliary business, the answer was no. So she began researching and networking to start her own business.

"I had absolutely no experience with running a business," Yaggie says. "I had to determine if this was something that had a chance to succeed, how much money I had to invest and how (to) go about actually starting it up." She received initial help from an accountant and got valuable information from an article she read on entrepreneurship/intrapreneurship.

When she launched the company in 1989, it served three facilities and she was doing the work herself. Slowly, it grew—she hired and trained her first employees and was approached to handle utilization review and quality management for one of her clients. Through her reputation and word-of-mouth referrals, the company added three facilities per year. Ten years after its start, she sold the company, which led to more changes and learning opportunities.

Growing from Necessity

Now, Yaggie's typical work day starts at 4 a.m. and ends anywhere between 13 to 14 hours later. Because she's a morning person, she uses the early hours to get organized and go through mail and publications. Then she checks in with managers by e-mail, voice mail, and personal contact. Later she travels to meetings and makes on-site visits to connect with facility directors and employees. The work day comes to an end as she checks in with regional offices and vice presidents to make decisions on matters at hand. Usually, she says, she'll spend one weekend day in the office catching up on unfinished business.

With such a challenging schedule, Yaggie needs all the skills in her command. The HIM-related skills she says she uses daily are the basic ones she learned in school and on site, like file and numbering systems, release of information laws, logs, documentation, risk management, and QA. "Working in a hospital setting, doing transcription, release of information, discharge analysis, filing, and admission procedures has really been a big help," she explains.

Although she didn't pursue an advanced degree, Yaggie says she's developed additional skills giving confidentiality seminars and doing time studies, in which she evaluates procedures and how time is spent on daily operations. While her business skills were developed on the job, she received intensive leadership training at the Blandin Leadership Program, a community

program in Grand Rapids, MN. She says she also relied on consultants in the early stages of her business to help with strategic planning.

She describes her growth process as one born of necessity. "I needed a challenge that was satisfying to me," she says. "When I started this role I became so enthusiastic and consumed with what I was doing that I lived it and slept it."

Kay Didear Folck: "I Was Willing to Give It a Shot"

"Awesome" is how Kay Didear Folck, RHIA, describes her 25 years in HIM. She says a series of opportunities rather than a deliberate course of action led her to her present position as HIM enterprise director for Cerner Corp. in Kansas City, MO.

Didear Folck was introduced to HIM during a difficult point in her nurses' training when the emotional aspect of patient care took its toll. Because her training also involved a lot of charting, she shifted her focus to medical records where her nursing background provided a solid foundation for HIM.

After graduation, she took a job as utilization manager at a 530-bed acute care hospital. Six months later, the HIM director quit, and the staff pushed for Didear Folck to take over the position. "I was willing to give it a shot because I had staff support...and with that kind of backing, I felt I couldn't lose," she explains.

Because she had such a good staff, Didear Folck says her philosophy in the four years she held that position was to "let people who know what they're doing do what they do best...(and) to be a resource, provide support, and let them do what they need to do."

This worked well for her later when some physicians approached her to manage their practice, which included a wider range of responsibilities. Through this experience, she discovered her knack for process redesign and oversaw the installation of the practice's medical office software system. She found she enjoyed working with computers and saw first-hand how it improved operations and patient satisfaction.

From there, Didear Folck became interested in studying law and worked as a legal assistant at a law firm. Her plan was to get into malpractice defense, but she says she quickly became disillusioned by the sometimes adversarial nature of the legal system. After moving to a small community and doing some work outside the medical field, she learned of an HIM administrator opening at a children's hospital. That, she recalls, provided quite a challenge.

"I remember being interviewed twice (at the hospital) and couldn't get to the department," she says. When she got the job and went to the department, she walked into an unfinished basement with stacks of records. "They were still doing things manually, writing coding information on cards. That was a real culture change."

Success and Change

The first part of Didear Folck's job was to computerize the department, which was a major shift for the staff. From there, she joined forces with finance and clinical managers to deploy a cross-departmental health information system (HIS) for the hospital, which expanded her leadership skills. Once the new system went live, she now had HIM, utilization management, and quality management experience under her belt.

Overlapping that leadership experience were opportunities in public policy and politics. Didear Folck was approached to run for the presidency of the Texas Health Information Management Association. "That (position) was challenging and rewarding," she explains. She represented the hospital and the association as an expert witness at the state capital. As a result of her defense of correct coding procedures, the Texas legislature adjusted claims reimbursement for neonatal care under the Texas Medicaid program.

Didear Folck's next move took her out of the traditional healthcare setting, yet allowed her to draw on past experience. She worked for CHC (Community Healthcare Computing), now known as Keane, and traveled the US and Europe, training HIM departments to use software systems. Her growing talent and skills caught the attention of Cerner Corp., which recruited her for a sales support position for its HIM systems and services.

She says the idea of being in sales initially made her nervous, because of her lack of experience in that area. But she soon became acquainted with sales projections, market analysis, and advertising, drawing on much of her medical background to make another successful transition.

In late 1999, Cerner went through a reorganization that broke the operation into separate companies within the corporation. Didear Folck was chosen to run one of those companies as HIM enterprise director. Like a company president, she oversees product management, sales, and customer service. Her division's outstanding quarterly profit reports reflect her success.

Now Didear Folck is facing another major transition—that of being a new mother. She's made the personal decision to step back from the director's position once her baby is born and will remain with Cerner in a corporate support role.

Karen Wager: "I'm a Student at Heart"

Karen Wager, DBA, RHIA, found success by combining her HIM background with her love of learning. She's an associate professor teaching graduate-level health information administration at the Medical University of South Carolina. She's also president of the South Carolina chapter of the Health Information Management and Systems Society.

An academic career was not Wager's original intention when she first studied health records administration in college. Her first taste of teaching came in the early 1980s when she was assistant director for medical records at the St. Paul Medical Center in Dallas. At that time, DRGs were first being implemented, and Wager volunteered to teach coding and terminology to the hospital's coding and physician office staff to improve the quality of coding for billing and reimbursement purposes.

During Wager's graduate studies at the Medical University of South Carolina, the curriculum was expanded to bring HIM to higher levels. She earned a master's degree there and later received a doctorate in information systems. Not surprisingly, she's a strong proponent of earning an advanced degree, which she says is important for those seriously considering HIM as a career.

She also sees the benefit of her own work and educational experience in the classroom. "I enjoy bringing my own research into class and sharing new information with students," Wager says. "I (also) love to interact with students and feel like I'm a student at heart. There's a real creativity and autonomy to what you do."

Building Confidence

As an associate professor, Wager says, she is responsible for her own research and publications, involvement on university and professional committees, student recruitment, and course development. One such project is helping to convert the present graduate program in HIM into a Web-based format to draw a larger market to the university. Wager expects the university will begin accepting students into a Web-based graduate program within the year.

Staying in touch with the healthcare industry is a personal priority, too. "Work experience is absolutely critical in terms of credibility with students," Wager explains. Not only does she draw on the basics from her early work experience, she takes advantage of the university medical center environment by serving on committees and contributing to hospital projects.

She also keeps up by taking classes and attending conferences on her own. "To be effective, you have to be willing to realize what you don't know and find ways to learn it, either formally or informally," she says. "Students will be receptive to you if you're genuine. If they see you're committed to learning and developing your skills, they'll be confident in the education they're receiving."

Mary Paul: "Building a Portfolio of Experiences"

Mary Paul, vice president and CIO at Columbia-St. Mary's Inc., is a big believer in creating your own opportunities.

She started with a bachelor's degree in HIM and has held roles ranging from coder to manager and director. Along the way, she worked in statistical research and developed a strong interest in data management and systems. Always, she says, she has relied on the broad knowledge she received from her HIM background. "It gives you exposure to the entire organization and a chance to see the whole picture," she says.

Paul says most of her professional development came through her on-the-job experiences and personal need for knowledge and challenge. "I've always loved data management and how you use data to understand problems and evaluate data relative to medical outcomes," she explains. "The roles and responsibilities grew from there."

Her main role now is to facilitate continued restructuring and unification of Columbia-St.Mary's, a four-hospital system in Wisconsin with 26 remote clinics. The two organizations came together in 1995 as part of a joint operations agreement. Paul describes the restructuring as a massive project in which she works through and with people to achieve change.

One of the most critical aspects of her job is making the change process manageable while meeting the needs of a variety of groups at different levels. "Even when everyone agrees that change is for good, it's difficult," Paul says. "You have to have accurate measures of success because the nature of change is so quick. You have to make sure changes are measurable and are actually improvements."

At any level, Paul says, the process of keeping current with the industry and technology is a shared responsibility. "It's a constant process of reevaluating (what you need to know)," she explains. Although she sometimes takes extra classes, she also stays up to date by reading trade journals and learning from vendors. "Managing technology needs is a collaborative effort and the team brings in the majority of skills on any given project or issue," Paul says. "If additional high-end expertise is needed, we then look to external vendors."

Learn by Doing

In Paul's view, leadership skills are an essential component to successful career growth. She measures her success by how well she establishes objectives and accountabilities on a broad scale and making sure goals are achieved on time. She acquired these skills throughout her career by observing successes as well as failures.

For Paul, creating your own opportunities involves building your skill set at every level in a variety of ways. "Education can open doors, but what sustains a person is what value you have delivered," she says. "You learn from all opportunities and look forward. It's not a linear process at all. I look at it as building a portfolio of experiences. The sum effect of it positions you for your next opportunity."

Beating a New Path

Evaluating your current skills and taking the initiative to build your skill set is the smoothest way to make transitions in HIM and beyond. Our profile subjects offer this advice to those who are looking to take a new path:

- **Learn from those around you.** Co-workers, associates from other departments, or vendors you encounter on an everyday basis can help you expand your knowledge
- **Get involved with professional organizations and volunteer to work on committees.** This allows you to network while getting an introduction to marketing, recruiting, and organizational management
- **Build your communication and leadership skills.** Your ability to work well with others and add value to your organization will be recognized
- **Keep current** with the industry by reading trade journals
- What you don't know, try to pick up by **taking continuing education, certification, and degree courses**
- **Learn what skills are needed** for the position you want, **acquire** those skills, and **demonstrate** your ability to do the job
- **Don't be afraid of change.** It's your biggest opportunity for growth

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Article Citation:

Hogan, Michele. "HIM Roads Less Traveled." *Journal of AHIMA* 71, no. 9 (2000): 50-55.

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