HIM, Meet Project Management: Why Project Management is a Skill Growing in Importance for HIM

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By Lisa A. Eramo

John Quincy Adams once said, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader."

Had HIM been as important in Adams' time as it is today, the former president would have surely included HIM professionals in the category of "leaders and pioneers of change" per his definition. Today's HIM professionals epitomize the definition of a leader, serving in highly critical roles overseeing corporate HIM departments and implementing large-scale projects such as ICD-10, the "meaningful use" Electronic Health Record (EHR) Incentive Program, computerized physician order entry (CPOE), and value-based purchasing initiatives.

The skills that Adams references in his quote—that is, the ability to inspire others to take action and meet goals—are also the trademark characteristics of an effective project manager. In fact, leadership and project management often go hand-in-hand.

A project manager is like the conductor of a symphony. They help direct all the different players of a project (instrumentalists) to keep them on time and on task, while also paying attention to the bigger picture—the sum outcome of the project's individual parts (the symphony).

HIM professionals might not always see themselves as project managers, nor may they have the formal title. The reality, however, is that the healthcare industry increasingly turns to HIM to serve as the "conductors" of projects that only continue to grow in scope and scale. Project management is a natural fit for HIM leaders who are accustomed to working with multiple departments and workflows thanks to the evolution of the EHR and, more recently, ICD-10.

"A lot of people would find that they're using project management skills already and may not know the terms or that there are formal tools that can be used," says Patti Serson, RHIT, PMP, project manager of information services at Central Maine Healthcare, in Lewiston, ME. Serson, who began her career in HIM as a file clerk in 1974, worked her way up to several HIM director positions before moving into project management in 1998. She is currently one of six project managers system-wide.

"HIM professionals can go into just about any department and automatically have a good high-level understanding of its workflow and what the department is trying to accomplish," Serson says. "That's because of their HIM education and their understanding of the revenue cycle and the electronic medical record."

A Core Competency for HIM

In today's healthcare environment, project managers are an essential piece of the puzzle because they oversee many moving parts, Serson says. This wasn't necessarily the case in the past. "Things weren't so complicated a decade ago," she says. "You could get things done in silos. That's not true today. Particularly with an electronic health record, everyone will feel the effects of changes made."

HIM professionals are particularly suited for this role because they're accustomed to looking at the big picture and answering questions such as:

- How does this initiative or goal fit within the larger organization?
- What are the implications for each department?
- Who are the stakeholders?

- What outcomes and deliverables can the organization measure?

The Project Management Institute (PMI) defines project management as the "application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements." Historically, individuals have practiced project management informally. In the mid-20th century, however, project management began to emerge as a distinct profession. Today, many hospitals employ project managers for a variety of initiatives, and some even have a distinct project management office/department.

Upon closer inspection, HIM and project management include many overlaps in terms of required skillsets and competencies. For example, both HIM professionals and project managers must exhibit skills related to leadership, communication, conflict management, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

HIM professionals may find that they also use many of the same tools as project managers. These tools range from the more sophisticated Microsoft Project to basic tools such as Excel or PowerPoint. Other project managers often use applications such as OneNote for documenting and managing tasks. Cloud-based tools are also increasingly popular because they allow project managers to share project plans, resources, contact information, and more with others spanning multiple sites and entities.

Those with project management experience seeking formal recognition can also obtain PMI's Project Management Professional (PMP) credential—an industry-recognized certification for project managers. Although the PMP isn't required to work in project management, Serson says she obtained it because the credential establishes credibility and helps her "apply the right tools in the right scenarios."

The PMP credential certifies a project manager's formal knowledge of the following five project phases and their corresponding tasks:

1. **Project initiation.** Perform a project assessment, define the high-level scope and risks, create a project charter, and obtain stakeholder support.
2. **Planning.** Develop a budget and project schedule; define roles and responsibilities; create plans for communication, procurement, quality management, change management, and human resource management; obtain stakeholder approval to execute the project; and conduct a formal project kick-off.
3. **Execution.** Obtain and manage project resources, execute tasks, ensure quality management, and maximize team performance.
4. **Monitoring and controlling.** Identify and quantify variances, perform corrective actions, update the project plan as needed, ensure that project deliverables conform to established quality standards, identify and address any new risks, and communicate project status to stakeholders.
5. **Closing.** Confirm whether project scope and deliverables were met, transfer ownership of deliverables to assigned stakeholders, distribute final project report, collate lessons learned throughout the project, and measure customer satisfaction.

Overlaps Between Project Management and HIM

Knowledge in both professions draw on these 10 areas:

- Communications
- Cost
- Human resources
- Integration
- Procurement
- Quality
- Risk management
- Scope
- Stakeholder management
- Time

"Most of your time is spent in project execution where the work gets done, but the most important part of project management is project planning," says Kathy Downing, MA, RHIA, CHPS, PMP, senior director of information governance at AHIMA. "You need to think of all the variables, get all the resources, and gain a solid understanding of when and how actions will take place."

Project managers are the ones who essentially ensure that projects are completed on time, on budget, and on scope—something that HIM professionals do each and every day when it comes to overseeing clinical documentation and coding, Downing says. "These goals are valid for any project you're doing in the organization regardless of whether it's something small like redesigning your department or a large interdisciplinary project like information governance."

Project managers are also the ones who must keep everyone motivated—something with which HIM professionals gained experience throughout the move to ICD-10 and other major transitions. "The most challenging aspect of project management is getting people who don't report to you to do what you need them to do," Downing says. "That takes a lot of negotiating, planning, and finesse."

Project Management as a Career Path

Project management provides HIM professionals with many opportunities for career growth, says Michele Carbone Elliott, RHIT, PMP, senior consultant with Blue Zephyr Consulting. Elliott began her HIM career in 1972 as a file clerk. She worked her way up to the position of HIM director, and in 1995 she became a senior analyst/project lead overseeing a new EHR implementation. "The hospital was looking for someone with a clinical background who could relate to physicians," she recalls, adding that the transition from HIM to project management was a smooth one because of the overlapping skillsets.

In her role with Blue Zephyr Consulting, Elliott assists clients with the implementation of EHRs and CPOE. She currently works with a large health system as they move to a new EHR, assisting their data integrity team to ensure accurate data flows between disparate systems.

As mergers and acquisitions continue to dominate healthcare, project managers will play a critical role in ensuring EHR interoperability, data integrity, record standardization, quality, and more. The projects will only continue to grow in scope as information flows beyond the walls of an individual organization.

Serson, for example, is currently helping to launch a physician clincial documentation improvement (CDI) program. She's also overseeing the meaningful use program, including implementing a patient portal, coordinating security risk assessments and remediation of issues, and managing audits. Another project pertains to quality initiatives, including an EHR upgrade to support electronic submissions of clinical quality measures and configuration of a sepsis management program.

ICD-10 has given many HIM professionals critical project management experience that they can essentially parlay into any direction they want, Downing says. In many organizations, HIM was responsible for creating an ICD-10 project plan, obtaining executive support, establishing a budget that was subsequently extended due to ICD-10 delays, assessing documentation specificity, providing organization-wide training, and establishing key performance indicators and deliverables to measure success.

Serson says she also handled the ICD-10 communications because she understood how coded data affected different clinical and financial departments. As a project manager, she was able to educate these departments about the importance of understanding how they used codes and the importance of determining the impact of ICD-10.

Although the PMP can be used in virtually any industry, there is a particular demand for it in HIM and IT, adds Downing, who began her own HIM career in the mid-1990s working as a project manager for a large healthcare organization overseeing the EHR implementation. When combined with HIM experience and credentials, Downing says the PMP can really boost one's career options.

"Healthcare is so complex," she says. "Successful healthcare project managers are those who already have an understanding of physician relationships, how the organization works and is paid, and who can identify the priorities."

Today's healthcare project managers are employed by hospitals as well as IT vendors, health information exchanges, insurers, and consulting companies leading initiatives such as:

- Adding a new service line
- Building a new facility
- Deploying computer-assisted coding (CAC) or CPOE
- Establishing a formal information governance program
- Implementing a new system-wide EHR
- Joining an accountable care organization
- Launching a patient portal

Many of these projects require a series of smaller initiatives that HIM professionals are well-suited to lead. Consider information governance—this project requires categorization of information assets, master-patient index cleanup, and development of policies and procedures related to the legal health record, record retention, and more.

Information governance also requires stakeholder buy-in. "It's a top-down executive change management initiative," Downing says. "You need executive support and funding. This is part of project management."

Today's project managers—particularly those with a PMP credential—also have incredible earning potential. According to the Project Management Salary Survey, the median salary of a project manager in the United States is $108,200.[1] PMP-certified project managers in the United States also earn 22 percent more than their non-certified peers, according to the survey.

In addition, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that the demand for IT project managers is expected to increase by 15 percent between 2012 and 2022, which is faster than average for all occupations.[2]

Common Tools Used by Project Managers

- Microsoft Project
- Access
- Excel
- OneNote
- PowerPoint
- SharePoint
- Visio
- Word

Gaining Skills for the Future

Experts agree that project management is a skill that every HIM professional must have in his or her arsenal going forward to remain competitive and relevant. Elliott says the sooner you can obtain these skills, the better. Elliott says she wishes she would have undergone formal project management training earlier in her career to help navigate major transitions, including moving from paper to electronic records, installing digital dictation, implementing chart tracking systems, and more. In today's HIM environment, Elliott says these skills aren't an option—they're a pre-requisite. Serson says PMI also provides many resources that can help HIM professionals start to build a foundation of knowledge.

The most efficient way to get project management experience is simply to get involved in any and all projects within the organization, Downing says. This includes projects in other departments. "Take on a small or large task. People always need help," she adds. "It's just a matter of volunteering."

Notes

[1] Project Management Institute. "Earning Power: Project Management Salary Survey Ninth Edition." 2015. www.pmi.org/~/media/PDF/learning/project-management-salary-survey-2015.ashx.

[2] Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Occupational Outlook Handbook: Computer and Information Systems Managers." January 8, 2014. www.bls.gov/ooh/management/computer-and-information-systems-managers.htm.

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