

Healthcare Career Path Leads to AHIMA CEO

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By Chris Dimick

Immediately after landing her first HIM job in 1978, Lynne Thomas Gordon became a member of AHIMA. Now, after a 30-year career that has ranged from HIM intern to hospital C-suite administrator, Thomas Gordon, MBA, RHIA, FACHE, feels her entire career has led to her recent appointment as AHIMA CEO.

"It is like every job that I have had has been preparing me for this role," she says.

Thomas Gordon has seen HIM from every level. She knows how important HIM's work is to daily hospital life, the trials of implementing an EHR, what it takes to teach students the industry, and how HIM work is viewed from the C-suite. She believes her diverse healthcare career will provide her the knowledge to steadily lead the association into this new, uncharted world of modern HIM.

She has several ideas regarding how AHIMA should play a role in HIM's success. This includes AHIMA continuing to offer HIM advocacy, pertinent education, lifelong learning opportunities, thought leadership, and industry-leading credentialing.

Practicality, Then Passion

The practicality of HIM was what first attracted Thomas Gordon to the industry. That would soon transition into a passion for the work. It started with some fatherly advice received as a teenager.

Thomas Gordon's father was an engineer at DuPont for 35 years who would routinely see young graduates come to the company asking for jobs. Typically, they would be turned away. Offering advice to his three daughters on how to avoid similar disappointment, he suggested they work in the healthcare field.

"He said, 'You guys can do whatever you want, but you really need to go into healthcare,'" she says. "You know if there is a war, you are going to have a job; if there is a depression, you will have a job.' Of course, he is a Depression Dad. I said, 'Okay, okay.'"

Leafing through a catalog from the Medical College of Georgia, Thomas Gordon paused when she saw the career listing for medical records. After visiting two hospital medical records departments and grilling the directors on their day-to-day work and job satisfaction, Thomas Gordon was convinced to enroll in HIM.

She went in knowing it would be a secure job. However, along the way she learned it would be a career she not only loves but one that would give her access to the top positions in healthcare.

Thomas Gordon landed her first position in the C-suite as chief operating officer at Shands AGH in Gainesville, Florida, due in part to her HIM experience.

Her interviewer, a physician pathology director, asked if she knew the difference between gross anatomy and microscopic anatomy. All previous candidates had failed to answer the question correctly. But Thomas Gordon's HIM anatomy and physiology training and years of working with medical records enabled her to supply the answer easily. That answer secured her the job.

That spectrum of healthcare knowledge-from macro to micro-draws Thomas Gordon to HIM.

"One thing I really love about HIM is that you get the big picture of the hospital," she says. "Having that health information background gives you that depth of knowledge you need. You get medical terminology, you understand the information flow, understand the revenue cycle. It has just been a great background for me."

A Fan of "Audacious" Goals

In addition to working as an HIM director, Thomas Gordon has held several administrator and chief operating officer roles in healthcare facilities around the country. All that experience will be utilized as AHIMA CEO, she expects.

HIM professionals today are expected to do more with less, while maintaining timely and accurate health information. Thomas Gordon realizes she is taking over the association at a frantic time for HIM professionals. Leading AHIMA in the age of ICD-10, HITECH HIPAA changes, meaningful use, and the ongoing push toward EHRs is an audacious and challenging endeavor.

"Once I saw the [AHIMA CEO] position specs, I said, 'You know what, I could really make a difference with this job,' specifically in this time that we are facing now," she says. "I'm a big fan of BHAGs, the big hairy audacious goals, and I thought this is a good BHAG I would love to get my hands on."

In this time of change, AHIMA's role in HIM professionals' lives has never been more important, Thomas Gordon feels. AHIMA needs to be there to help.

"Our members are not alone. AHIMA is going to be right there with them, partnering with them, listening to them, trying to do what we can to make sure everyone is successful," she says.

As healthcare changes, HIM needs to change with it. But core principles must be maintained. AHIMA members' mission will always be centered on improving care and healthcare processes-helping deliver quality care through quality health information. HIM is also the conscience of healthcare, maintaining the privacy, security, and confidentiality of patients' most private information, Thomas Gordon believes.

Becoming the "Go-to" People

AHIMA has a big role in fostering this vital profession, she says. Providing education, training, and leadership expertise to members so they can become "the C-suite, go-to person for decision making" in a healthcare facility is a goal of Thomas Gordon's for AHIMA.

"So if you are in the C-suite and you have a problem you are trying to make a decision on, HIM is the person that you go to and ask 'What is going on with our patient population, and what information can you provide for us to make a difference?'" she says. "We (HIM) have the information at our finger tips, and we understand the information better than anyone in the organization.

"I think we need to do a better job of being proactive and providing information or putting ourselves out there to be that go-to person."

Members need to continue to develop change management and leadership skills, maintain credentials, and seek out lifelong industry education. AHIMA must foster those principles through education and advocacy, Thomas Gordon says.

"We (AHIMA) need to listen to our members, listen to our vendors, listen to what is going on in government, changes they are making," she says, "so that we become sponges and ask, 'If this is going on, what products do we provide to the members to make them successful?'"

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