Help Wanted: Five Steps to Take Before You Hire

Save to myBoK

by Nadinia A. Davis, MBA, CIA, CPA, RHIA, and Marion K. Gentul, RHIA, CCS

Are you hiring? This excerpt from AHIMA's new publication, Effective Management of Coding Services, *offers basic guidelines that coding managers can use to assess their facilities' needs when recruiting applicants to fill a vacancy in the HIM department.*

Step One: Perform a Needs Assessment

When a vacancy occurs in the coding staff, the first thing the HIM department manager should do is perform a **needs assessment**. This involves the following tasks:

- performing a job analysis
- assessing staff productivity requirements
- analyzing the experience level of the coding staff
- conducting a salary survey

Each of these tasks is a key element in helping the healthcare facility determine what coding positions are reasonable and necessary.

Step Two: Perform a Job Analysis

The coding manager should not automatically try to fill a vacancy with a new coder who is just like the one who left. For example, filling a position vacated by a coder with six years of experience in the facility with a coder from outside the facility who also has six years of experience is not necessarily the best solution. The coding manager first should review his or her options. Questions to ask include:

- should a new employee be hired and trained to fill the vacancy?
- can the additional work be divided among current staff members?
- can a current staff member be promoted to the position vacated?
- should the department outsource the work?

During the vacating coder's time of service, the department probably has hired, trained, and educated any number of coders, one of whom could be promoted to fill the open position. Obviously, when a current staff member is promoted to fill an open position, the vacancy simply shifts to another position. However, the position vacated by the promoted staff member may be easier to fill if it requires a lower skill level or less experience. Moreover, promotions within the department can boost staff morale, which is often needed when a staff member resigns.

During the time of a staff shortage, the coding manager should periodically review staff productivity and workload to assess their impact on morale and to avoid the loss of additional staff. Moreover, he or she can incorporate staff input when addressing pertinent issues, deciding whether to promote a staff member, or reorganizing work space and job responsibilities. In cases where current staff have to compensate for a vacancy, the coding manager should consider making whatever adjustments are necessary to balance the workload and to delegate some tasks temporarily to non-coding staff.

Finally, when the coding manager finds it necessary to hire a coder to fill a vacated position, he or she must justify that decision to the facility's administration. Thus, it is advisable to have benchmarking data and survey information completely up to date. In addition, the coding manager must know the costs for overtime or for contract coding if the vacant position is not to be filled

promptly. The longer a position is left unfilled, the more likely the facility administration or owners are to decide that it is not really needed. Moreover, in times of layoffs, unfilled positions are often eliminated automatically.

Step Three: Assess Staff Productivity Requirements

The second part of the coding manager's needs assessment addresses staff productivity requirements. One approach is to review coder productivity (for both full- and part-time personnel) during regular hours and shifts. Such a review helps the coding manager determine whether productivity fluctuates at different times of the workday. For example, productivity is likely to be higher at night when fewer distractions or interruptions are present.

To compensate for productivity lost because of a change in personnel, the coding manager might be able to persuade some staff members to shift hours temporarily, perhaps by offering incentives such as a shift-differential increase in compensation. A shift-differential increase in pay may prove to be more cost effective than overtime compensation.

Another approach to compensating for lost productivity is to arrange for coding staff to work when the HIM department is normally closed. This option requires notifying other departments and physicians as well as security staff that coders will be working after hours.

Average discharges, productivity standards, and normal work hours all should be factored into the calculation of coding staff needs. Coders do not work every day. Vacations, sick days, holidays, downtime, continuing education, and non-coding responsibilities all must be considered.

In addition to assessing the productivity requirements of the HIM staff, the coding manager may want to conduct **benchmarking surveys** to determine the productivity requirements of local healthcare employers or those with a similar service mix. Some facilities may be willing to share this information directly. Local coding vendors also can be a useful source of information. Information items to be requested include hours worked, additional tasks performed, abstracting requirements, data-entry requirements, and vacation/ sick days, in addition to the number of health records coded per time period.

To have information available when recruitment becomes necessary, the coding manager should conduct benchmarking surveys on a routine basis. Routine benchmarking also helps the coding staff avoid complacency or the excessive assumption of unrelated tasks.

Step Four: Analyze the Level of Experience of Current Staff

The staff's level of experience is another critical factor to consider when deciding how to fill a vacancy. When the staff's level of experience is strong, hiring a trainee may be a possibility. However, in the absence of experienced leadership or a staff resource person, a skeleton staff or a staff that is relatively inexperienced may be unable to support the hire of an untrained coder. One way to determine the experience level of the staff is to review each individual's current productivity and error rates and then compare them with previous productivity rates.

Step Five: Conduct a Salary Survey

Understanding the economic marketplace is essential to any needs assessment. AHIMA is a good source of general salary information by region for AHIMA-credentialed coding staff. Local outsourcing coding vendors also are good sources of information, as are local colleges and universities with recent survey data for the region.

State hospital associations are another good source because they conduct salary surveys for all the main job categories generally found in hospitals. Hospital administrators and human resources (HR) departments frequently use this information. However, salaries can vary widely within a state, and compensation is typically higher in metropolitan areas than in rural areas.

Salary surveys should be performed every one to two years. The HR department usually conducts them, but the HIM department may want to do job-specific surveys and then compare the results. One reason for this is that the two departments could have different hiring criteria. For example, the HIM department's main objective in hiring a coder is to find the best-qualified candidate whereas the HR department's main objective may be to lower the compensation level for the position.

Indeed, some healthcare facilities offer their HR departments incentives to achieve savings in hiring practices. Thus, the coding manager must work with the HR department to ensure a balance in overall hiring goals and objectives.

Moreover, coding managers could use salary surveys done within their local marketplace to help them adjust compensation or environmental factors to better compete for coding employees. However, facilities competing for the same qualified candidates may not want to share information. When salary survey information is unavailable locally, coding managers will need to seek it from facilities with similar profiles that are located outside the immediate marketplace. In that way, competition for the same candidates is less likely.

Surveyors sometimes can increase their success by offering to share the results with everyone who participated in the survey. However, this usually will work only if the surveyors guarantee the participants' anonymity.

To order Effective Management of Coding Services *(AC100001), please visit* www.ahima.org *and click on "Professional Development," or call (800) 335-5535.*

Article citation:

Davis, Nadinia A., and Marion K. Gentul. "Help Wanted: Five Steps to Take Before You Hire." *Journal of AHIMA* 73, no.3 (2002): 54-55.

Driving the Power of Knowledge