

How to Get Ahead in Coding: One Company's Grassroots Programs Offer New Grads and Seasoned Coders Opportunities for Professional Development

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By Daniel Land, RHIA, CCS

When one reaches a certain point in their career, thoughts often turn to the subject of legacy. While there are myriad ways to give back to one's profession, mentoring those with the earnest desire to grow is often the most powerful and rewarding—and critical to the continued relevance of the HIM profession. Think for a moment about the effects a mentor has had on your life. The gift of a mentor's time and willingness to share hard-earned knowledge and wisdom is often life-changing for those in whom they invest.

To this end, the leadership at mid-revenue cycle vendor MedPartners identified a unique way to give back to the health information management (HIM) profession by crafting an out-of-the box solution to a challenge that exists for many new HIM grads: finding their first coding job. This concept was developed by MedPartners and later expanded to include a career bridge that trains seasoned coders to become coding auditors and mentors. The premise that education is not just the learning of facts but the training of the mind to think (to paraphrase Einstein) informed the direction of the academy concept, which has successfully trained hundreds of HIM professionals. The academy model has worked well for MedPartners and can be emulated by other healthcare vendors or organizations looking for ways to cultivate in-house talent.

Tips for Building an Academy at a Facility

- Create a test environment of real medical records that apprentices can draw upon for learning purposes
- Build an academy based on your individual staffing needs
- Teach the fundamentals of coding in a logical sequence of easy-to-understand modules
- Mentor apprentices in a manner that promotes learning and ongoing dialogue
- Act upon opportunities to improve your apprenticeship program over time based on feedback from the learners
- Transition academy graduates into their new roles with continued audit oversight to ensure measurable proficiency

A Unique Perspective

MedPartners dialogues with scores of hospital clients and consultants on a daily basis, which lends itself to unique insight. This information, coupled with research, revealed the immediate need for a dynamic solution that tackled the challenges that exist within two specific HIM career paths.

In 2015, more than 5,200 students graduated from 336 CAHIIM-accredited programs and began job searches, according to AHIMA. A survey conducted in 2016 by MedPartners of CAHIIM-accredited program directors revealed an alarming statistic: 46 percent of graduates were unable to find employment within the first six months following graduation. This figure was based on a more than 80 percent response rate.

Contrast this data with the US Department of Labor's (DOL's) prognostication that HIM employment "is projected to grow 15 percent from 2014 to 2024, much faster than average for all occupations."¹ The DOL expects to see 217,600 jobs in the field by 2024, growing from 188,600 in 2014. The significance of the projected growth rate prompted the DOL to award two grants

totaling \$12 million to the AHIMA Foundation and several other healthcare organizations to facilitate apprenticeship programs.²

Another gap identified was in the evolutionary process from veteran coder to coding auditor. This specific career step has historically lacked definition and often occurs by happenstance. Yet, the importance of the role of a coding auditor continues to grow in today's climate of ever-increasing scrutiny on data quality and fiscal integrity in healthcare, as well as the industry's move to computer-assisted coding. The coding auditor's role has expanded to include that of editor of computer-generated codes, subject matter expert on the global validity of the record for coding purposes, and educator to other coding professionals. Additionally, the learning curve for ICD-10 will continue to exist as new codes, guidelines, and regulations come into being. Finally, ICD-11 will come to the US at some point.

As stated in AHIMA's HIM Reimagined (HIMR) white paper, "The coding function, the value of coding, and its relationship to many other healthcare structures is not in question... HIMR seeks to identify and prepare future professionals with the skills needed to adapt in a changing environment." It became clear that two workforce development programs were needed to fill the gaps that exist at two different stages of one's coding career.

ICD-10 Apprenticeship Academy

The idea for an ICD-10 apprenticeship academy stemmed from the desire to help facilitate employment for HIM baccalaureate and associate degree graduates from CAHIIM-credentialed programs across the US. Many new graduates find the doors of employment closed to them due to their lack of experience and a potential employer's inability to find time to train aspiring coding professionals.

The apprenticeship academy program embraced this challenge by partnering with long-term trusted clients to create a solid foundation upon which the academy was built. MedPartners' healthcare partners allow access to their test environments, many of which were originally built as ICD-10 training platforms for their own staff. The test environments are populated with real medical records, which allows the apprentice coding professionals to practice in a real-life setting complete with access to the facility's electronic health record and encoder without the pressure of DNFB (date not final billed) implications. The importance of access to live medical records cannot be overemphasized and is an important feature that is lacking in most traditional HIM educational programs.

Industry-recognized educators were hired to build course content and teach ICD-10 coding to recent CAHIIM-accredited school graduates. Upon successful completion of this portion of the academy, small groups of apprentices are paired with HIM auditors who serve as "on the job" mentors in the test environment. The small auditor-to-apprentice ratio, which allows for dynamic one-on-one mentoring, facilitates significant expansion of the apprentice's knowledge base.

Once sufficient coding proficiency is demonstrated in the test environment, the apprentice is moved to the partner's live production environment. Mentors remain closely attached to coders during this period, wherein coding accuracy and partners' DNFB goals are the primary focus. Once accuracy in the production environment is achieved, productivity becomes important. The exposure to live medical records in both test and live production environments, coupled with a mentor's oversight, are keys to apprentices' success. This model provides recent graduates with a 360-degree "real-world" view of the opportunities and challenges of inpatient coding.

MedPartners debuted the first ICD-10 apprenticeship class in June 2015 after receiving a plethora of applications from recent graduates with baseline coding knowledge. Three years later, the organization continues to see remarkably positive results from each group of apprentices. Despite a significant investment of financial and intellectual capital, no apprentice was charged a fee to participate in the apprenticeship academy. As with any industry-leading venture, the continued success of the academies is dependent upon lessons learned and continual evaluation of its effectiveness and relevance.

Outpatient Auditor Academy

Market demand is steadily increasing for coding auditors who are proficient in multiple disciplines of outpatient coding. Outpatient auditors are valued for their vital role in education of the coding workforce, ensuring data integrity, ensuring success of the revenue cycle, and developing the outpatient clinical documentation improvement (CDI) space. In response to the growing demand, MedPartners launched an outpatient auditor academy in 2017 designed exclusively for seasoned coding

professionals who are interested in advancing their careers. The core of the academy teaches the global perspective of auditing wherein each sub-specialty of outpatient coding is reviewed and the finer points of communication are discussed. Central to the structure of the academy is the concept of “auditing through the lens of education,” which emphasizes the ability to effectively mentor and educate with the ultimate goal of empowering coding professionals to become their own subject matter experts through self-directed research.³

The structural framework of the outpatient auditor academy mirrors that of the ICD-10 apprenticeship academy in that both utilize an online learning management system. This system serves as a centralized repository for all educational modules, recorded lectures, and grades. The academy student is able to revisit prior modules in order to gain a better understanding of the subject matter. The formal application process to the outpatient auditor academy, which is presently open to current employees only, requires the applicant to submit a resume and earn an acceptable score on an outpatient coding proficiency exam. Since this opportunity is geared toward individuals who possess superior outpatient coding skills, both components of the application process are an important part of candidate selection. A third requirement is the candidate's ability to demonstrate a compelling reason for wanting to join the academy.

Academy content is structured according to modules that refresh all aspects of outpatient coding. Lectures accompany each module and learners are afforded the opportunity to dialogue with instructors. The outpatient auditor academy was specifically designed to train the learner to think strategically and globally. The transitional challenge from experienced coder to auditor does not lie in the technical skill, which already exists. Rather, the challenge lies in the learner's ability to blend their technical skills with a broader understanding of compliance, revenue cycle, mentoring, and education. Academy students are made aware of the fact that, as auditors, they are responsible for setting the correct tone with whomever they are mentoring. The development of their soft skills is closely monitored and gaps are addressed in the business etiquette modules. Lastly, academy students are taught the correct way to collect and share audit feedback through positive dialogue and detailed reporting. The success of the outpatient auditor academy has paved the way for an inpatient auditor academy, which is scheduled to debut this year. Best practices and lessons learned from both academies have informed the creation of the inpatient counterpart.

Emphasis on Business Etiquette

MedPartners recognized that traditional HIM academic programs place varying degrees of emphasis on business etiquette and, as a result, academy students have not had uniform exposure to the significance of the subject. Therefore, business etiquette is viewed with equal importance in both academies as a vehicle for success.

The academy students are tasked with reviewing educational modules that provide an in-depth look at the role of business etiquette in their professional life. The assessment portions of these modules utilize open-ended questions that prompt introspection and self-assessment on the part of the academy student. Opportunities are provided to role-play challenging real life scenarios with fellow students and instructors. Academy graduates are equipped with the soft skills necessary to help navigate the challenging healthcare landscape.

Program Takeaways

The logical way in which the academies are structured, the quality of educational content, the talent level of the instructors, and a high degree of organization are essential success factors. A few takeaways from the development of this program include:

- Each iteration of the ICD-10 and outpatient auditor academies informs the next on best practices (how to do things better)
- The academy model is costly yet profitable
- Academies successfully bridge gaps at various career stages and provide a strong career ladder
- Based on the overall success of the academies thus far, MedPartners plans to replicate this model in other divisions of the company to address growing industry demand for top-grade talent
- Participants consistently demonstrate company loyalty in exchange for the unique opportunity of career growth and better earning potential, which is afforded them through the academy concept
- Participants witnessed the power of creativity through their participation in the academies and are more likely to employ creativity to problem-solve in their daily lives

- Learners consistently demonstrate willingness and desire to accept critique from instructors and auditor-mentors because the academies offer a safe space in which to question and grow
- There is measurable growth in the technical skills and soft skills of the participants
- Academies mirror the cycle of life in that veteran healthcare professionals mentor the next generation

Notes

1. US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Occupational Outlook Handbook—Medical Records and Health Information Technicians." October 24, 2017. www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/medical-records-and-health-information-technicians.htm.
2. Butler, Mary. "AHIMA Foundation and Partners Receive \$7.1 million Apprenticeship Award." *Journal of AHIMA* website. October 7, 2016. <http://journal.ahima.org/2016/10/07/ahima-foundation-and-partners-receive-7-1-million-apprenticeship-grant/>.
3. Land, Daniel. "Auditing ICD-10 Through the Lens of Education." *Journal of AHIMA* 87 no. 10 (October 2016): 82-83. <http://bok.ahima.org/doc?oid=301907>.

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