

It's All About Privacy

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by Anne Zender, editor

When users of the Medscape or CBS HealthWatch Web sites have questions or concerns about their privacy, they can send e-mail to an address like privacy@medscapeinc.com. At the message's receiving end is likely to be Lynne Shoemaker, RHIA.

"I'm a clearinghouse for questions from customers," says Shoemaker, who answers the users' questions about privacy-and other issues, including requests from those concerned about receiving "spam" e-mail to those who can't figure out how to unsubscribe from newsletters.

But that's only a fraction of Shoemaker's responsibilities at Medscape, an electronic health information company located in Hillsboro, OR. As healthcare compliance and privacy officer, Shoemaker also is responsible for developing policies related to security and confidentiality of health information, training her fellow employees, and monitoring ongoing issues such as HIPAA compliance. As Medscape's stock in trade is the electronic medical record-including an enterprise EMR, an Internet-based EMR, and an online patient-created medical record-security and confidentiality are pressing issues. It's Shoemaker's job to make sure they remain top priority.

Breaking New Ground

As Medscape's products are developed, Shoemaker ensures that their health information security and confidentiality mechanisms meet accreditation, legal, and regulatory requirements. She also develops the company's health information policies and implements them, as well as ensuring that any Medscape staff who have contact with health information are appropriately trained in security and confidentiality procedures.

She also keeps an eye on initiatives such as HIPAA compliance as well. "Our data center is used to store our EMR, and so we consider ourselves a business partner under HIPAA," Shoemaker says. "So we need to comply with those regulations. We're a hybrid of areas and forging new ground. Nobody thought about an organization like us when they were developing the regulations."

Shoemaker is also active in initiatives like HiEthics, the coalition of consumer healthcare sites working to support quality health information on the Internet. (See "Developing 'Cyberseals' of Approval" in the AHIMA Library.) Because one of its sites (www.CBSHealthWatch.com) is a consumer Web portal, Medscape aims to be compliant with HiEthics requirements regarding the protection of information. Shoemaker herself is a member of a HiEthics committee.

Bringing HIM to a New Audience

Although much of her job consists of monitoring compliance with regulations, Shoemaker values the creativity that she encounters in a software company. "I had no clue software paid the way it did, or how creative you are allowed to be," she says. "You have a concept, you write code, and you make it happen. I was amazed at the level of freedom to do what needed to be done."

When she first joined the company in its software testing area, she was the only credentialed HIM professional. She found herself educating her colleagues about HIM professionals and what they do. "I had some resistance at first," she says. Now that she's proven her value, she says, the situation is reversed-colleagues frequently ask for her input and review.

E-Health Opportunities Ahead

Although the dot-com frenzy of the past few years has died down, Shoemaker believes that HIM professionals have a future in the world of e-health. To get there, she urges her fellow practitioners to brush up on their computer skills, from mastering

basic software applications to understanding document management and having at least passing familiarity with a number of different applications.

She also urges those who may be looking at moving into this area to "figure out how organizations need our skills, even if they don't know it yet. It's important to look at all the issues that organizations need help with, like data transfer, legal and accreditation standards, and privacy, and figure out what we can do-and for whom."

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