

Leading HIM Reimagined by Example

[Save to myBoK](#)

By Lisa A. Eramo, MA

Technology has transformed almost every industry, and health information management (HIM) is no exception. Data used to be handwritten words on a page. Now, with the rise of electronic health records (EHR), data is becoming an organization's most important financial asset. Human coders used to comb through medical records to assign codes. Now, computer-assisted coding (CAC) increasingly assumes that role, while coding professionals begin to serve as code auditors and validators. Underlying these changes is a growing risk of cybercrime that magnifies the need for data integrity, privacy, and security—all aspects of HIM's expertise. Some HIM professionals have been able to expand their skill sets to keep up with these changes, while others have struggled to stay relevant. Experts agree that the industry must address the widening skills gap that could render some professionals unable to move into new and emerging HIM roles as older traditional HIM jobs eventually fade away.

AHIMA has already begun to provide a framework for advancing the HIM profession forward and keep it on pace with the march of technological change. In 2016, the association launched its HIM Reimagined campaign, which calls for higher-level skills and education. AHIMA will also propose curriculum changes related to HIM Reimagined at its Assembly on Education Symposium this summer. These changes—most notably the inclusion of data analytics, integrity, and management in the formal HIM curriculum—will ensure that new HIM professionals are ready to meet the demands of emerging healthcare roles.

However, those who have worked in the profession for quite some time need to take matters into their own hands to stay relevant. Many have already heeded the warning to gain the additional education, experience, and credentials necessary to stay ahead of the curve. These trend-setters are leading HIM Reimagined's recommendations by example—showing that the transition to in-demand and emerging healthcare roles is possible for HIM professionals. This article features several of these individuals, each of whom answered the following question: How do you stay relevant in HIM?

Obtaining Higher Education

Staying relevant in HIM is all about thinking ahead, says Donna Barnard, MBA, RHIA, CHFP, HIM director at the University of Rochester Medical Center, based in Rochester, NY. Barnard obtained her master's degree in business administration because she knew she ultimately wanted to move into HIM leadership positions. "I tried to think about where I wanted my career to ultimately take me," she says. "I was trying to expand my knowledge and marketability for more significant roles."

Barnard says her master's degree helped her achieve these goals, and it also taught her how to problem solve and work as part of a team. These skills were paramount as the health system acquired additional facilities because Barnard was charged with consolidating three HIM departments, cross-training staff, and moving coding professionals remotely—tasks that required sensitivity to each organization's unique culture.

Stepping Outside of One's Comfort Zone

Increasingly, HIM professionals must use their skills outside of the hospital working for payers, consulting organizations, academic institutions, governmental agencies, pharmaceutical companies, research institutions, and vendors. Fred Maher, RN, MA, RHIT, can tell you all about this. He currently serves as a practice transformation consultant at United Physicians, based in Bingham Farms, MI, where he spends most of his time helping physician practices implement EHRs to gain efficiencies. This includes redesigning workflows, integrating EHRs with provider registries, and helping practices achieve patient-centered medical home (PCMH) status.

Maher, who began his career in nursing, knew he needed a master's degree to make himself more marketable. Within three years of obtaining his nursing license, he received a master's degree in management and supervision with a concentration in healthcare administration. It was this degree that ultimately helped him land various data analyst positions at Blue Cross Blue

Shield (BCBS) of Michigan. His higher education was only one piece of the puzzle, though. BCBS also wanted someone with an understanding of the clinical data who would be willing to learn IT skills—particularly how to pull data off mainframe computers and normalize it for cost and utilization purposes to support underwriting.

“They asked me, ‘How much do you know about the mainframe computer?’ I said, ‘Absolutely nothing, but I’m willing to learn.’ They said, ‘Ok, the job is yours,’” Maher says.

Before moving into his current role with United Physicians, he served as a health IT consultant for the company, teaching physicians how to enter data into web-based disease registries and comply with quality reporting requirements—skills he gained through on-the-job training from a colleague.

Transitioning roles isn’t easy because it often means stepping into new and unfamiliar territory, Maher says. But doing so can help HIM professionals learn and grow. Though Maher started on the clinical side of healthcare, his career story could easily be replicated by HIM professionals looking to get into data analytics. “You’ve got to look around the curve and wrestle your fears into a box,” he says. “It’s opportunity, and it may not knock twice.”

Seven Emerging Roles in HIM

- Chief learning officer
- EHR implementation specialist
- Enterprise master patient index manager
- Meaningful Use specialist
- Research and development scientist
- Vice president of coding
- Vice president of security

To learn more about these and other current roles in HIM, as well as chart a career path from your current position to a higher-level role, visit the AHIMA HIM Career Map at <https://my.ahima.org/careermap/index.html>.

Paving Many Paths

Thinking outside the box is a critical part of staying relevant in HIM, says Shawn Armbruster, RHIA, director of coding and clinical documentation improvement (CDI) at Hurley Medical Center, based in Flint, MI. Armbruster began her career as an HIM director and privacy officer for a small physician-owned hospital before becoming a coding operations manager at a larger health system, where she led the coding and CDI teams and was trained as a super-user on the system’s EHR.

Her EHR skills and HIM operations experience eventually helped Armbruster land a HIM analyst position for a hospital where she became officially certified in building the HIM modules of the EHR system. “I still get a lot of recruiters looking for my experience because I have the EHR certification and the HIM operations background,” she says.

Through networking, Armbruster landed her next position as the director of data integrity and compliance at The Rybar Group, a healthcare financial consulting company, where she managed a team of coding auditors and was responsible for strategic planning and business development.

In her time at The Rybar Group, she saw an increase in attorney and investor clients among the typical hospital and physician practice clients. To hone her communication skills across different audiences, she engaged a professional coach who helps her maximize her potential. “It’s good sound advice on how to approach professional situations,” Armbruster says. “That has been really helpful for me from a business development perspective.”

Gaining IT Experience

Moving into new and emerging HIM roles requires a combination of on-the-job experience and education, says Jami Woebkenberg, MHIM, RHIA, CPHI, HIMS director for the Arizona West Service Center at Banner Health, based in Sun City

West, AZ. Woebkenberg, who began her career as an HIM manager overseeing a two-hospital system, gained this experience by working closely with that hospital's IT team to make changes or edits to its first health information system. "Because we were a small hospital system, I had the opportunity to work very closely with IT. Whenever there was a new release to the system, I helped with the testing," Woebkenberg says. "I didn't know how to write reports, but I knew what technical pieces needed to come together in those reports."

It was a combination of her HIM and IT experience that eventually helped her land a system coordinator position at Banner Health where she developed many of the policies, procedures, and workflows related to the health system's first EHR. Several years later, she moved into a director-level role that has since expanded to include HIM oversight for five hospitals, 50 outpatient clinics, and 11 urgent care centers.

Having a master's degree in health informatics and information management helped take her IT skills to the next level, giving her the ability to create document imaging workflows for ambulatory care settings and assist with EHR transitions throughout Banner Health's various sites. She obtained her CPHI credential to demonstrate her knowledge of informatics to others. "If you want to move up in your career, you need to own it," Woebkenberg says. "You can't sit back and expect someone else to do it for you. You need to put yourself out there, learn as much as you can, and volunteer for projects even if they're outside of your traditional scope."

Six In-Demand Credentials

The Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA®) and Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT®) are still the premier HIM credentials to demonstrate expertise. However, new and emerging roles in HIM may require one or more of these additional credentials:

- Certified Documentation Improvement Practitioner (CDIP®)
- Certified Health Data Analyst (CHDA®)
- Certified in Healthcare Privacy and Security (CHPS®)
- Certified Healthcare Technology Specialist (CHTS)
- Certified Professional in Health Informatics (CPHI™)
- EHR vendor-specific certifications

Embrace Change, Obtain In-Demand Credentials

Staying relevant in HIM is all about being able to pivot in one's career, says Tammy Ree, RHIT, CCS-P, CHC, CPC, an HIM professional with nearly 30 years of experience. Ree began her career as a physician coder for a large multi-specialty practice before moving into a multitude of other roles. In each position, she applied her coding knowledge in new and innovative ways, including facilitating documentation improvement education for physicians, developing the entire auditing service line for a facility, educating physicians about how healthcare laws and regulations affect their practices, and even working in utilization review.

"I've made a lot of shifts, but I think that's why I continued to be relevant," she says. "I figured the more well-rounded I am, the better my chances will be at moving up the ladder."

HIM professionals need data analytics experience to move into many new and emerging roles, says Amanda Spears, MA, CHDA, strategy and planning program manager at Kootenai Health, based in Coeur d'Alene, ID. Spears, who has a master's degree in sociology, previously worked in higher education performing business intelligence analytics for colleges and universities before moving into the healthcare industry, where she now performs analytics to support population health, patient retention, and the addition of new service lines. She's currently leading the analysis to determine the feasibility of participating in Bundled Payments for Care Improvement (BPCI) Advanced and other bundled payment models. Spears, who gained database skills mainly through on-the-job experience, is one of two strategic planners and works with a team of seven data analysts. "We are the ultimate dot connectors," she says.

Although her master's degree focused heavily on research methods and statistics, it was her CHDA credential that has ultimately proven most helpful. Not only has it helped demonstrate her expertise, but it has also made her more aware of the multitude of internal and ancillary data sources available for analysis. "This credential focuses on healthcare-specific knowledge in a very broad way," she says. "It makes me a better analyst. I know the right questions to ask."

Regardless of the direction in which HIM professionals want to move, dedication is key, Spears says. "The most important thing above everything else is your drive and willingness to learn," Spears says. "That drive will take you anywhere you want to go. It will give you everything you need."

Skills Needed to Meet Future HIM Job Demands

- Auditing
- Business development
- Clinical documentation improvement
- Cybersecurity
- Data management, visualization, and analytics
- Financial analysis
- Informatics
- Information governance
- Management of remote workers
- Process improvement
- Project management
- Revenue cycle management, including knowledge of new and emerging payment models such as risk adjustment, BPCI, CPC+, PCMH, and others

Tips for Moving into New and Emerging Roles

Change is scary for anyone—and it can be especially intimidating for long-time industry vets. The good news is that HIM professionals can take small steps that will pack a big punch in terms of staying relevant. Experts offer the following advice:

Conduct a Personal Skills Gap Analysis

Where are your gaps, and what do you need to bridge them? Take a course? Secure a credential? Gain on-the-job experience? This analysis may also lead you to realize that you already possess valuable skills that you can parlay into other emerging roles.

"You have to figure out where you want to go and what you need to do to move yourself closer to that," Maher says. For example, coding professionals with EHR experience who want to move into health IT consulting can take courses in applying Health Level Seven, building interfaces, and using registries. Individuals who supplement these courses with education about Medicare payment reform will have a highly desirable skillset, he says. "You can show physicians how technology aligns with reimbursement. Show them the value of the technology in the context of payment," he says. "Anything you can do to help them use technology to get paid will be in demand."

Spears agrees that with nominal training in databases and programming, HIM professionals can more easily move into new and emerging IT-related roles. Start with a free tutorial on Structured Query Language (SQL), and then take a course at a local community college, she says. "Once you learn one programming language, it's so much easier to build on that and acquire new skills fairly quickly," Spears says.

Get Involved

Ask your analytics team if you can partner with them on projects, Spears says. "There's a good chance that there will be some analytics folks who were starting out like me who didn't have a lot of the healthcare background," she says. "They

would benefit just as much from that partnership.”

Likewise, ask hospital leadership how you can be most helpful to your organization, says Barnard, who posed this question to leaders and was told to learn more about the bigger picture of revenue integrity. She decided to serve as an interim manager overseeing a team of worker’s compensation insurance collection specialists to gain more experience on the professional billing side—insight she says will be valuable in any future role.

If you’re looking to branch out into IT, volunteer to become an EHR super-user, Armbruster says. Some hospitals may also be willing to hire HIM professionals who don’t have an EHR certification but are willing to obtain it. If you’re a coding professional who wants to move into CDI, reach out to a CDI specialist, Ree says. “See if they’ll sit down with you and walk you through what they’re looking for,” she says. Ask physician advisors to explain procedures to help you visualize them and gain clinical knowledge, she adds.

Look Ahead to New Opportunities

Experts agree that organizations continue to expect more of HIM today than they did a decade ago. “In our organization, I’m seeing other departments say, ‘Ask HIM—they’ll either know what to do, or they’ll help us figure it out.’ They’re grabbing onto the knowledge base that comes out of the HIM department,” Barnard says.

Coding professionals will need to offer value that goes beyond what CAC already provides, Ree says. On the hospital side, they’ll need strong auditing skills as well as the ability to identify the root cause of denials, validate charges, and communicate fluently with physicians and CDI specialists. On the physician practice side, physicians will increasingly look toward coding professionals to help them thrive under new payment models, avoid audit risk, and capitalize on Big Data, she adds.

AHIMA is actively working to support HIM practitioners by providing continuing education and learning opportunities around each of the emerging knowledge areas listed above. All HIM professionals need to do some soul-searching to determine how they’ll stay relevant in the ever-changing field of HIM, Barnard says. “The question is, do you want to make yourself relevant? If you want to, you’ll find a way to do it.

“If you don’t want to, that’s ok, but you may find out you don’t have a position two years from now.”

Give Yourself Credit

Above all, have confidence in yourself, Armbruster says. “It starts with us realizing we have relevance and skill sets that are important and then showing up to the table,” she says. “Then we might be asked to do something that’s new and uncomfortable, but we’ve got to be able to say, ‘Ok, I’ve got support from AHIMA, classes I took, or real-world scenarios I’ve been through.’”

Armbruster also engages in networking. “I cast my net widely to build a network of professionals I can call upon when I don’t have the expertise,” she says. “Where people see confidence, they see ability.”

Lisa Eramo (leramo@hotmail.com) is a freelance writer and editor in Cranston, RI, who specializes in healthcare regulatory topics, HIM, and coding.