

Leading the Health IT Revolution: HIM Revolutionaries Needed to Ensure Quality Health Data are Utilized

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We are going through a revolution in healthcare, spurred on by a desire to improve healthcare quality and decrease costs. As we work to make these changes a reality for the US healthcare delivery and payment system, a “patient-centric” model is emerging that increases the involvement of patients in their own care-particularly through health information and other technologies. The healthcare industry has always had two sets of consumers; the patient (or caregiver), and the payer (or sponsor). The downturn in the economy and the forthcoming changes outlined by the Accountable Care Act are putting even more emphasis on consumer involvement and the appropriate application of technology for lowering costs and improving care quality.

Changes in technology cannot be discussed without recognizing the role of government. While state and federal government entities have taken the lead to jumpstart the healthcare industry’s pace for technology use, larger health plans have taken up the call and also pushed for wider use of health information, data, and technology.

Recently, innovation contests have become an increasingly frequent occurrence-sponsored by both the government and private organizations. This trend reflects an industry-wide desire to continue improving current healthcare technology and the attempt to break the chains of paper attached to old ways of doing business.

In addition to the push for innovative technology, the healthcare industry has seen an additional push from the government for the “meaningful use” of this technology, as well as technology developments that allow patients and caregivers to access their own health information and take on a more active role in the care process. While this push is associated with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (ARRA-HITECH) it must be noted that a number of leading healthcare providers and health plans were already moving in this direction without government involvement.

HIM Revolutionaries Wanted

Vital components for any revolution to achieve lasting success include leadership, strategy, and a practical plan to achieve results and raise awareness. Leaders must be engaged throughout the movement-HIM professionals included. The current revolution is changing technology and information practices in order to meet healthcare quality and affordability goals. With the importance placed on both clinical and administrative data, HIM professionals will continue hearing about the role of data and information management. HIM leaders will note that the industry is moving not to a single electronic health record, but many. If an organization is to successfully achieve the quality and cost saving goals of information development, then data collection, storage, analysis, transmission, access, use, and protection must be governed. HIM professionals are well positioned to step into leadership roles as those governors.

Information is no longer “locked away,” but instead exists throughout an organization’s enterprise-as well as beyond it. The burgeoning concept of health information exchange and other similar programs-such as accountable care organizations-calls for the exchange of data and information in a much broader universe. As leaders, HIM professionals will determine the most effective uses of technology and will contribute to strategies for moving the industry forward.

A revolution of this magnitude will bring about change at every level of an organization, and HIM professionals have the necessary training to lead that change. Data integrity is becoming a key factor in achieving the goals of this revolution, and HIM processes affect all aspects of data integrity-from the methods used for initial data collection to how it can be stored for maximum utility, accessibility, and security. Coding and analytic professionals are well positioned to organize, control, and audit this process.

Mapping a Successful HIM Career

The education staff of the AHIMA Foundation has designed a new career map, available at www.hicareers.com/CareerMap, that has already opened both government and industry doors for an adequate evaluation of the current and future health information field roles. In addition, AHIMA has added credentials in areas of clinical data improvement and analytics to highlight HIM skills that are rapidly becoming crucial for improving quality and lowering costs.

For over a decade AHIMA has been working with a number of global standards organizations to insert the profession's best practices and principles into the transactions and data standards. These national and international standards will serve as the foundation for a truly interoperable health information network and exchange. AHIMA is working to provide more education and training for HIM professionals to step forward and engage in the standards development process.

Leaders are also needed in the areas of SNOMED CT and other computer-based terminologies, as well as for mapping development. Without such professionals, data and information uniformity and interoperability will not occur and standards will not deliver their promise of more efficient and effective use of health information.

Slow Development of Standards

Organizational and healthcare industry leadership is needed. Currently the only mandated standards are those identified in the ARRA-HITECH "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program. While this is slowly effective, industry-wide use of standards will not begin until providers can demand that their technology vendors agree to abide with common guidelines and incorporate uniform standards into their products. Health IT purchasers have two approaches. They can demand particular standards in their contract negotiations with a systems vendor-often difficult to achieve. Or, organizations can work together at vendor user meetings to push for the integration of standards and terminologies into products. In either case, HIM professionals have to be included in organization leadership in order to develop and present the most effective case for these stipulations.

All professionals need to be advocates, and now is a critical time for HIM professionals to step forward and develop new roles that will allow them to lead and facilitate change. In the meantime, AHIMA has also called upon the federal government to develop and implement a strategic plan that coordinates all industry standards and quality measure efforts.

Election Responsibilities

Next month our nation will participate in one of our greatest freedoms and responsibilities-voting in the 2012 election. This has been a long campaign year, but before voters is the opportunity to select the President and Vice President, all members of the House of Representatives, and one-third of US Senators. AHIMA encourages its members to visit with the candidates and discuss the direction of health data use and the information revolution. AHIMA has successfully worked with both major parties as well as Congressional independents. In the past both Democrat and Republican administrations have supported efforts to adopt EHR systems and achieve interoperability and administrative simplification. While HIM issues are not major campaign issues, they are important and AHIMA's staff hopes members will take the time to cast an informed vote.

With a new 113th Congress entering office in January, it is important to note that AHIMA will hold its annual Capitol Hill Day on March 19, 2013, preceded by the March 18 Leadership and Advocacy Symposium. One goal of the event will be to help Congressional members gain a better understanding of our profession, our issues, and our role in the healthcare revolution.

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