

Leading the Quest for Compliance

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by Jane Blumenthal, associate editor

I am the proverbial optimist—if you think that way, everything will come true,” says Ruthann Russo, JD, ART, about her successful Bethlehem, PA-based health information management consulting firm, Cabot Marsh Corporation.

And you wouldn’t expect to hear anything else from the energetic CEO of what was recently recognized as one of the fastest growing private companies in the US by Inc. magazine. In 1992, she combined her optimism, drive, and business savvy with the talents of her husband, Joe Russo, to establish a seven-man healthcare consulting operation that specialized in fraud and abuse. Today, Cabot Marsh has grown to more than 100 employees that generate revenues exceeding \$5 million annually.

Having graduated college with a liberal arts degree, Russo worked for one year as a French teacher. So she had no HIM experience when she first entered the healthcare industry as a quality assurance assistant in New Jersey. However, she credits this career transition with playing an influential role in her success; it was her first step in learning how important on-the-job flexibility is.

Knowing little about the field she had entered, she pored through huge binders containing information on data coding. That was in 1982.

The advent of DRGs, which Russo says “blew the whole lid off the medical records field,” was what really intrigued her, since it meant that the staff formerly categorized as clerical was now in charge of the financial stability of their healthcare institutions. “There was a stigma attached to health records,” she says. And Russo was more than ready to take on the new challenges presented by health information management. Her interest sparked by data coding drove her to finish AHIMA’s Independent Study Program in eight months. By April 1983, she had completed the exam.

Since then, Russo has gained expertise in health information management through work as a tumor registrar, supervisor of outpatient coding, and DRG manager. She also has taught health information management at various community colleges, served as an assistant dean at Northampton County Community College, and worked for years as an independent consultant for various firms. In addition, she earned her *juris doctorate* during her teaching years.

However, it was the time spent as an independent consultant that tempted her to start her own company. Frustrated at the inconsistency of consulting firms she had contracted with, she and her husband created a company that hired full-time employees, as opposed to independent contractors. She also was interested in focusing on the computerization of the healthcare industry and utilizing her legal background.

Making an Impact

Today, Russo prides herself in her active participation within the company. “You have to be involved,” she says, “especially when the company is growing.” In fact, she reports recently finalizing a deal with one client after a string of 62 conference calls. She believes that maintaining a strong involvement within the company serves a variety of purposes. Besides keeping her in tune with her clients and employees, it enables her to set an example for the entire company.

She also believes in staying on top of the game. Beyond the growth of the company, there is the changing focus of the healthcare industry to stay familiar with. “You have to be flexible, and can’t be averse to change. There’s no set way of doing things since the company is so new,” says Russo.

There is no “typical” day for Russo—besides managing clients, she handles a variety of other duties. For instance, one week held a presentation and meeting with coders and compliance officers to develop a new coding compliance program, a

compliance program demonstration, meetings with various clients, marketing strategy development meetings, and an in-house operations meeting to determine a new career focus plan for her own company.

Currently, the biggest issue Russo says she faces is the change taking place in the industry due to legislation such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). Whereas her main focus for the company used to be promoting services, she is now redirecting that focus to educating clients on the new fraud and abuse provisions mandated by the government. "As a company, we have to work through problems our clients are facing so we can understand where they are coming from. Many of our clients are unsure if their organization even has a compliance plan in place," says Russo. "The whole issue of [industry] change is a huge one, and right now, people need time to digest the information they are getting on compliance." Healthcare facilities, she says, often think they are in compliance after performing audits that focus on the wrong area, such as revenue enhancement. She hopes to contend with fraud and abuse by encouraging both solid compliance plans and the importance of maintaining credentialed HIM professionals on staff.

As she looks to the future of compliance, Russo sees it as another transition facing the healthcare industry. During the 15 years she has spent in health information management, she has witnessed major changes in the field. And she anticipates this new challenge with her usual enthusiasm. Her formula for accomplishing this goal? "You need to know what it is that you want—use your experiences and build upon what you know. And make sure everyone knows where you want to go."

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