Lessons Learned from Training an International Workforce

Save to myBoK

By Paul Strafer, RHIA, CCS, and Cassie Milligan, RHIT, CCS

In an increasingly interconnected world, offshore coding has piqued the interest of many health information management (HIM) directors hoping to cut costs, alleviate staffing shortages, and tap into a new pool of talented individuals. Coding companies have worked earnestly to train overseas healthcare professionals in preparation for greater US demand and broader acceptance of a global coding workforce. While pockets of speculation remain, reports of positive international experiences have grown.

This article reflects on training for coding professionals conducted by one US coding company as it worked over the past three years to build an international coding workforce. Lessons learned overseas are parlayed into best practices for coder training both here at home and abroad.

Vet Your Vendor: 10 Questions to Ask about Offshore Coder Training

Your outsource coding vendor has decided to outsource some or all of its coding to international locations. Now what? Be sure to ask these 10 questions:

1. What coding credentials and educational backgrounds do your offshore coders possess?
2. Do you staff a department that specifically oversees coding compliance and educational opportunities for offshore coders?
3. Does your offshore coding department have an onsite manager/instructor?
4. What's your process for transitioning offshore coders from a learning environment to a production environment?
5. What specific ICD-10 training do you provide to offshore coders? Dedicated number of hours? Months of training? Did the training include anatomy and physiology? Can you share a copy of the curriculum?
6. Describe your commitment to ongoing education. What type of ICD-10 refresher training do you provide?
7. How do you continually monitor and assess your offshore coders?
8. What makes you confident that the offshore coders can accurately code cases specifically for my facility?
9. To what productivity and quality expectations do you hold offshore coders accountable?
10. What is your QA process for ensuring data integrity? How many reviews are performed on each record?

Seven Lessons Learned

Coding company H.I.M. On Call began training an international coding workforce in 2012 and continued through the October 1, 2015 go-live of ICD-10. Over three years, the company trained and educated 300 international coders. Of these coders, 40 percent were completely new to the coding profession prior to ICD-10—but not new to healthcare.

In fact, many of these individuals were doctors, nurses, pharmacists, or transcriptionists. Each coding candidate is required to hold the equivalent of an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate-level degree. The company found that ancillary healthcare professionals make ideal coding candidates—a reality that also holds true here in the US.

The following is a summary of seven lessons learned based on H.I.M. On Call's global coder education experience.

Lesson #1: Coders learn at their own pace.

The majority of the company's ICD-10 training pre- and post-ICD-10 implementation focused on ICD-10-PCS coding for complex procedures. As with domestic coders, however, offshore coders require remedial education tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses. Managers need a mechanism to monitor performance continually. It should also be noted that many offshore coders have previously worked in other areas of healthcare, including direct patient care. Take this into consideration when developing training material that capitalizes on this knowledge.

Lesson #2: Build a dedicated training department/team.

Coding managers are often too busy and distracted to be able to focus on the unique needs of coding professionals' training. It's important to identify one or more ICD-10 instructors who interact directly with trainees. For an international team, the instructor should reside and work within the same location as the coding professionals. It was found that an onsite coding trainer was most effective because the instructor could:

- Monitor coding professionals' performance
- Answer questions as they arise
- Identify and refine training needs accordingly

This department or team should also be responsible for providing ongoing coding professional education based on internal audits as well as changes and updates related to coding guidelines and *Coding Clinic* references.

Coding professionals new to coding attended onsite instructor-led ICD-10 training sessions. Offshore coding professionals with more experience—as well as US-based coders—engaged in self-study and had access to an instructor only when questions arose. To ensure consistency, however, H.I.M. On Call used the same basic syllabus for all coding professionals. Identifying an offshore instructor specifically for newer coders helped the company oversee the training process more intimately.

Lesson #3: New coders require similar resources regardless of location.

The coding professional's actual location—overseas or in the US—did not directly correlate to their performance. The company definitely dedicated more time and resources to training less-experienced coders—as was expected. But the location of these new coders was irrelevant. There was no difference in the amount of resources required to train inexperienced coding professionals domestically versus internationally.

Lesson #4: Coding credentials help maintain compliance.

Credentials demonstrate coding proficiency and a commitment to the profession. Budget for the cost of enabling all coding staff to become credentialed once they are trained—overseas or domestic. Also budget for ongoing continuing education necessary to maintain credentials and ensure compliance.

Lesson #5: Pre-production and continual online assessments are a good idea.

Once ICD-10 training is complete, the company's offshore coders spent a few months using its central education platform. In this virtual environment, the company was able to monitor performance before releasing coding professionals into a production environment.

Once in a production environment, consider performing 100 percent quality assurance (QA) reviews until newly trained coding professionals meet a specific quality threshold. For international coding professionals, two audits should be performed on site as well as a third audit conducted by US auditors. Coding professionals should reach a minimum 90 percent accuracy rate before they are released from a review. The company found when working with new coders this process could take up to three months for an average coding professional.

Lesson #6: Make the most of downtime.

During downtime, the company's offshore coders use an online assessment tool to constantly refresh their ICD-10 knowledge. Assessments are correlated with production audits to pinpoint educational opportunities. For example, if production data and

the assessments both indicate a pattern of errors related to orthopedic coding, then instructors focus remedial education for that coder on orthopedic anatomy and/or relevant coding guidelines.

However, if production data indicates a pattern of errors—but a coding professional's assessments indicate compliance—then the errors could be related to physician documentation rather than a coding knowledge deficit. This is important because it ensures coding professionals receive the education they actually need—not the education that managers assume they need.

Lesson #7: Account for cultural differences.

Cultural differences are a common reality for the global workforce. Accounting for these differences makes training sessions more meaningful. For example, in some cultures, it's less acceptable to question authority. When teaching coding, however, instructors should encourage students to ask questions when they don't understand a concept or guideline. These differences should always be incorporated into education methods and communication techniques.

Quality coding is quality coding, regardless of where a coding professional resides and works. Properly trained coding professionals—overseas or here at home—help offset unanticipated fluctuations in productivity and accuracy.

Offshore investments made by US coding companies have built an entire fleet of coding professionals who continue to demonstrate a high degree of proficiency in ICD-10. Lessons learned can be used by HIM directors to improve their own training programs while also vetting overseas coding vendors.

Paul Strafer (paul.strafer@himoncall.com) is coding and education manager, and Cassie Milligan (cassie.milligan@himoncall.com) is data quality improvement manager at H.I.M. ON CALL, Inc.

Article citation:
Strafer, Paul; Milligan, Cassie. "Lessons Learned from Training an International Workforce"
Journal of AHIMA 87, no.5 (May 2016): 26-29.

Driving the Power of Knowledge