Navigating Your HIM Career: Beware of Churns and Roundabouts

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One of the oldest objects in my home is a butter churn that belonged to my great-grandmother. The sole purpose of this device is to agitate cream into butter. At the time it was used (around 1900), 40 percent of the American work force was needed to feed the nation. Today three American farmers provide the same output as 40 workers at the beginning of the 20th century. Technology and machines are the difference, and a similar revolution is under way in coding.

Today economists use the term "churn" to describe the cycle that continuously redirects resources to new and more profitable uses. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 47 percent increase in the demand for health information technicians by 2012, an indication that the healthcare industry needs more HIM professionals as it expands, changes direction, and finds new technologies.[1]

In the future few HIM professionals will remember how to assign codes in ICD-9-CM or manage health information services without computers. The economic churn in healthcare is creating new positions, but do they require the same skills and involve the same work?

Caution: Automation Ahead

A *Business Week* article titled "The Future of Work" outlines some work processes that can be "routinized"; that is, broken down into repeatable steps that vary little from day to day.[2] The key to surviving churn is to possess the ability to perform more complex tasks such as pattern recognition for data quality assessment and analysis of coded data for decision support and other uses.

It is important to know where we are going and to prepare carefully for the trip to come. How will jobs change when information capture is performed in real time by computer applications at the point of care? Clinical information can be processed by language engines that work 24 hours a day without breaks or expensive employee benefits.

What happens when these systems begin paying for themselves by saving employers money that now pays for coders to review records and abstract data from charts the old-fashioned way? Will you be out of work? Is investment in your education, credentials, and efforts wasted? Research from MIT and Harvard University indicates that workers who exhibit flexibility, creativity, and lifelong learning commitment are spared from downsizing, replacement with software, or offshore outsource contracts.[3] Those who embrace and adapt not only survive, but get ahead.

Watch for Undercurrents

Churning forces exist in the workplace, undercurrents coders must identify, accept, and be prepared to successfully negotiate. Advancement of electronic record systems and the increased use of software that produces coded data are just a few of the latest trends to be aware of in the HIM industry. Other churns include favorable salaries and working conditions for non-HIM professionals for coding and data management positions and the increased use of offshore labor or outsource contracts to meet demand. There is also a movement under way to implement new code sets and coding systems to replace old and familiar ICD classification in use for the past 25 years.

The tipping point for rapid change in the coding profession could be a decade away or in a few short years. With the advent of automated encoding systems, maps, and crosswalks, there is a need for experts in coding systems, especially those who understand both the old and new systems. The new roles are projected to require a higher-level data management function

than in the past, because the job will require the management of coded data for a variety of users and functions beyond claims processing.

Clinical coding is a distinct language that will continue to be essential for communication throughout the healthcare delivery system. As clinical terminology systems like SNOMED-CT are adopted as core data standards, there will be an increased demand for individuals who understand the differences, similarities, and overlaps between coded data systems. If ICD-10 and SNOMED-CT are not in your professional development itinerary today, they should be.

Roundabouts: Perception versus Reality

Unfamiliar territory creates apprehension when you aren't sure where you may find yourself. We all want some confidence that when we set out to a new destination we won't lose our way. Transition to the e-HIM^{TM} roles of the future is comparable to an encounter with an urban roundabout by a driver who is more familiar with the wide-open spaces of Interstate 80 across the Great Plains.

Some of the major cities in the eastern part of the US use roundabouts as traffic controls. According to the New York Department of Transportation, "the lack of acceptance can generally be attributed to the negative experience with traffic circles or rotaries built in the earlier half of the twentieth century. Severe safety and operational problems caused these traffic circles to fall out of favor by the 1950s. However, substantial progress has been made in the subsequent design of circular intersections, and a modern roundabout should not be confused with the traffic circles of the past."[4]

When contrasted with conventional intersections, roundabouts result in shorter delays, increased capacity, improved safety, and better aesthetics, despite the initial concern by drivers that this type of intersection leads to more accidents. Today's coding professionals are entering a roundabout that will get them to where they want to go if they select the right turns in the process.

It is human nature to be skeptical of change until the new methods are proven to be better than the current process. As HIM professionals we must guard against the creation of our own obsolescence. New methods of encoding clinical data are inevitable, and we have to learn to use roundabouts along the career path or we may find ourselves lost or passed over by others more attuned to the demands of 21st century informatics.

Whether driving your car or the clinical data for a healthcare enterprise, changing from square corners to traffic circles requires experts at the wheel, educated passengers, and student drivers prepared for what lies ahead. HIM professionals are uniquely positioned to embrace and lead the way to better ways of managing patient data. One of the best ways to prepare for the roundabout ahead is to drive instead of allowing others to choose the route and control the destination. One of the major vehicles for job security involves new code sets and their integration into the electronic health record of the future. We need to be the voice of reality when others resist the change to better systems.

Keeping Current: The Latest Movements in HIM

"The ICD-10 Preparation Checklist" (*Journal of AHIMA*, June & July/August 2004) is a useful travel guide to gain confidence with new and improved data structures. ICD-10-CM has many similarities to ICD-9-CM, and skilled coding professionals need not fear the change.

The ICD-10-PCS system for reporting hospital inpatient procedures has two attributes not present in the ICD-9-CM Volume III system. ICD-10-PCS offers completeness in providing unique codes for all substantially different procedures. The ICD-9-CM classifications allow the same procedure performed on different body parts, with a different approach or a different type of procedure, to be assigned the same code. ICD-10-PCS also offers expandability: as new procedures are developed, new codes are easily incorporated as unique codes.

The AHIMA work force data analysis is both reassuring and troubling for HIM professionals responsible for coding operations. Industry trends indicate that clinical coding and data processing work is on the list of jobs with the strongest growth potential. Even *Reader's Digest* reports that medical record technicians are in high demand.[5] Survey respondents (about 96 percent of them) reported there were some or many vacant positions for coders in their region of the country.

As the churn continues and we face more roundabouts in the HIM career path, remember to be the expert at the wheel and use your GPS, cruise control, and other navigational tools. In other words:

- Learn all you can about data management techniques that use coded data.
- Explore the use of automated software for code assignment so you understand how it may affect current tasks and job descriptions.
- Become a technical expert in the new coding systems to position yourself in high demand as the industry looks to the future.
- Don't fear churn or the roundabout. If you know where the industry is headed and watch where you are going, you can avoid the off-ramp, serious crashes, and obsolescence by following an updated road map and choosing a better route to job security.

Notes

1. Hecker, Daniel. "Occupational Employment Projections to 2012." *Monthly Labor Review*, February 2004. Available online at http://stats.bls.gov/emp/home.htm.
2. Coy, Peter. "The Future of Work." *BusinessWeek*, March 22, 2004. Available online at www.businessweek.com/magazine/con-tent/04_12/b3875615.htm.
3. Ibid.
4. New York State Department of Transportation. "Modern Roundabouts." Available online at www.dot.state.ny.us/round-abouts/round.html.
5. Myer, Marc. "Who's Hiring? Check out These 15 Hot Jobs." *Reader's Digest*, April 2004, 116–23.

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