Necessary Coding Skills: What Employers Are Looking for in Coding Professionals

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by June Bronnert, RHIA, CCS

The employment market for coders is expected to increase 36 percent or more between 2002 and 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.[1] Even now we are experiencing a shortage of qualified coders. Ask a coding manager to name the biggest challenges of the job, and recruitment and retention of qualified coders will no doubt be on the list.

This article provides insights into what employers look for from candidates. It also suggests ways new coders can increase their employability although they may lack work experience. Individual employer requirements can differ, but the themes are universal.

Coding: The Broad View

In recent years the work force landscape has changed, and the coding profession has not been immune to these changes. The image of a typical coding professional has also evolved in the eyes of employers. Several factors influenced this change, including financial pressures on the healthcare system and advances in technology. The expectation of students entering the work force is higher than ever, notes Gail Smith, MA, RHIA, CCS-P, program director of the HIM program at the University of Cincinnati, as there is less time to train an inexperienced coder.

Coders play a vital role in translating clinical information into quality data. A coder must understand clinical diseases and invasive procedures, and it can be a challenge keeping current as medical technology advances. A coder must also understand how clinical data drive the financial aspect of healthcare. Coders need to be aware of the entire revenue cycle and compliance regulations. Facilities cannot financially afford poor data.

As healthcare services expand, so do employment settings for coders. Traditionally, coders were employed by hospitals; now coders work in a variety of settings ranging from physician offices to home healthcare. Coding professionals must know all laws and regulations for their specific setting.

The Skills Employers Seek

Employers seek coding applicants knowledgeable in ICD-9-CM, CPT-4, and HCPCS, though the level of knowledge required varies according to the setting. Inpatient coders may not have strong skills in CPT-4, for example, but they should have a basic knowledge of the coding system. A coder employed by a consulting company or physician's office should have a strong background in physician evaluation and management coding. Coders should prepare for specific work settings by becoming familiar with the setting's coding guidelines and regulations.

Potential applicants must have other skills beyond basic coding abilities. As part of the healthcare team, coders interact with a variety of healthcare professionals from the business office to clinicians. Thus it is important that they possess effective interpersonal communication skills. Written communication skills are also vital to the coding profession. Employers must ensure that coders can form an appropriate physician query.

Coders must embrace new technology as well and be willing to learn new software and solve technical issues. Time management skills are also a necessity, especially as coders move into the realm of remote coding. Employers look for individuals who take the initiative to research references and solve difficult cases.

Education-A Necessity

The preference for an applicant's degree of education may vary according to setting. However, education is still a top priority for employers looking for coding professionals. Employers want applicants who have had basic coding classes, at minimum. Employers may desire that applicants complete an AHIMA certificate program at a minimum.

Because of the shortage of qualified coders, some employers may hire applicants who have had training in other allied health fields and have taken formal coding classes, even if not in an approved program. Employers prefer that candidates have credentials, but they may not require them. They may also be willing to hire a candidate in the process of earning credentials or may make pursuing credentials a condition of employment.

Education may not involve a formal institution. Deb Boppre, RHIT, CCS, VA project manager at United Audit Systems, notes that the more knowledge and experience you have coding in different settings, the more marketable you are as a coder. If you are currently coding one specific type of case-for example, pediatrics-perform a self-assessment to see what other coding skills may need updating. Investigate ways to obtain or improve in that area. For example, you could take a continuing education class online or attend a local seminar.

Locating Employment Opportunities

While there is no one way for an employer to recruit, a potential applicant should take note of some effective methods employers have used. One recruitment technique is a partnership with area HIM programs. An internship for coders from various programs to work 80 hours over a period of time was an effective way for Susan Schehr's organization to fill open coding positions. Schehr, RHIA, chief of HIM at the Department of Veterans Affairs in Cincinnati, OH, explains that students took actual records to code and worked with a coder. Currently employed coders, students, and the manager met at a weekly roundtable to discuss the cases and review the students' work. While the employer did not pay the six interns, Schehr says, the facility did hire two of them to fill coding vacancies.

Networking and referrals are other effective ways to find open coding positions. Become involved in the HIM association in the area where you wish to obtain employment. Do not be afraid to get involved. Start by volunteering for your local association. Not only does this provide you with a way to network, but it also displays your skills as an HIM professional to potential employers by working side by side with them.

Interviewing with Potential Employers

The method by which employers assess an applicant's skills varies, but one common tool is a comprehensive coding exam. Employers typically ask applicants a series of behavior-based questions to assess their skills after the exam. Do not be surprised if the questions include defining coding terms. Collette Ferguson, RHIA, assistant chief of the HIM department of Veterans Affairs in Cincinnati, OH, notes she has interviewed numerous candidates who have struggled with basic definitions of coding-related terms, such as identifying the three key components of an evaluation and management code.

Another factor influencing an employer's decision on hiring is references provided by the applicant. References should be professionally specific, and you should inform your references that they might be called so that they are prepared when a potential employer contacts them.

Higher employer expectations have led to changes in coding education. As employers have come to expect higher-level skills from graduates, instructors have responded by providing students with more real-life cases. Students should prepare portfolios of successfully completed classroom projects. During interviews, these may be used to illustrate learned skills applied to actual cases.

Do not expect to be new to the coding profession and land your perfect job right away. Be open to interviewing in various settings. You never know where the opportunity may lead. Showcase your skills during the interview process.

As the coding profession continues to change, it is important for coding professionals to pursue lifelong learning. Commitment to ongoing education will lead to endless professional opportunities.

Note

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Medical Records and Health Information Technicians." Available online at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos103.htm.

Additional Readings

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Scitar, Marilyn P. "Flexibility: One of the Coding Professional's Ever-widening Skills." CodeWrite Community News, October (2002). Available online in AHIMA's Communities of Practice at www.ahima.org.

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