

New Era in Records Management: Preserving and Protecting the Content, Context, and Structure of Digital Records

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Healthcare is entering a new era of records management, one that will be digital, enterprise-wide, and dynamic. However, many healthcare organizations describe their current state as hybrid, meaning a combination of paper and electronic.

While a convenient way to depict the often messy mix of paper, digital, and imaged record components, the term hybrid is a bit misleading. Hybrid records are a point along the transition from all paper to electronic, and a point that we don't want to stay at any longer than we must.

This issue's cover story, "Record Limbo," finds that HIM professionals are adapting workflows and processes to the hybrid environment, but for most it's a hit to productivity and a challenge to efficient management. In "Minimizing Hybrid Records" Teresa Hall urges careful management to avoid losing ground in the transition from paper to electronic.

Core Principles, New Applications

The ISO 15489:2001 standard defines records management as the "field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records, including the processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records."

The general principles of records management apply to records in any format. Digital and electronic records raise specific issues in ensuring that the content, context, and structure of records are preserved and protected when records do not have a physical existence. This is the new era of records management.

An effective working relationship with IT professionals is key to an EHR's success. In "Health IM and Health IT" Beth Acker, Deborah Adair, and Betsy Sweeney share emerging examples of the effective organizational and working relationships so critical to success in electronic records management.

From time to time I hear an HIM professional say that he or she has "left HIM" and is working in IT. This isn't leaving HIM; it just reflects the need for IM specialists throughout an organization. As the authors write, "Health information management no longer happens 'just in the record room.' Increasingly HIM professionals partner with other departments and disciplines to bring HIM principles to new information management and business processes."

Cynthia S. Hyde describes an excellent example of an old records management function adapted to electronic records in "Planning Forms Automation." A forms automation system enables a smooth transition to the EHR and is therefore critical to the system.

I think of records management as one practice domain for HIM professionals, who in the past were jacks-of-all-trades, including document and records management, data collection, quality control and analytics, privacy and security, quality management, compliance, and more. Each area offers opportunities for specialization in the future.

Watch also for more on enterprise records management in the coming year, as this is a strategic initiative for AHIMA in 2009.

Improving healthcare information goes beyond EHRs. Early next year look for results from a healthcare administrative simplification summit cosponsored by AHIMA, the Medical Group Management Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Medical Association, and others. The summit will identify practical steps to fix processes that

waste tens of billions of dollars. These include redundant or conflicting processes for provider credentialing, claims adjudication, data reporting, and many more functions that must be standardized and streamlined to reduce waste.

Article citation:

Kloss, Linda L. "New Era in Records Management: Preserving and Protecting the Content, Context, and Structure of Digital Records" *Journal of AHIMA* 79, no.11 (November 2008): 25.

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