

Not What We Were in 1928: a New Professional Definition

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by Lynda A. Russell, EdD, JD, RHIA

When was the last time you talked about using an "icebox," a "horseless carriage," or a "ditto machine"? Just as time and innovation have changed our ideas about familiar objects, they have also changed the definition of our profession. HIM professionals have come a long way since the organization of the Association of Record Librarians of North America was born in 1928. Now, AHIMA is eager to share the newly approved "Professional Definition for Health Information Management," highlighting the breadth of our expanding profession. In this article, we'll explore the roots of the new professional definition, which can be found on the following pages.

Moving into the Future

Back in 1928, our association's main goal was elevating "the standards of clinical records in hospitals, dispensaries, and other distinctly medical institutions."¹ Today, we have expanded our professional reach far beyond "standards of clinical records" and "distinctly medical institutions." We are a more diverse group, with different skills in a variety of care settings across the healthcare spectrum and beyond.

As a result, we can no longer embrace the "traditional versus nontraditional" career dichotomy because it no longer exists. The professional definition is not specific to any HIM credential or employer type. It defines us collectively as professionals with a wide variety of attributes and skills. It should be important to all HIM professionals, because it is all of us.

Developed by the AHIMA Committee on Professional Development, the Joint Committee on Education, and the Board of Directors, the definition will:

- enable us all to find ourselves in the definition regardless of our working environment
- ensure we recognize the many attributes we have to offer when seeking employment
- enable employers to recognize and appreciate our extensively varied knowledge base and skill set
- enable the general public to recognize and appreciate what it means to be a HIM professional

The Elements of HIM

The definition is centered around the words "health information management." For each of these three words, the definition describes its "domain" the elements it encompasses and examples of the ways HIM professionals make a unique impact on the industry in each domain, including the activities and functions they perform in each area.

The domain description for "health" focuses on the many different kinds of data including clinical, epidemiological, demographic, and financial data. Our unique impact on the value of this data derives from our organizational skills, statistical knowledge, attention to quality, and understanding of clinical costs and reimbursement rules.

The domain description for the word "information" addresses the forms in which data are maintained and the media used to store that data. Our unique impact on the forms of "information" includes managing enormous amounts of data, summarizing data into useful reports, and developing uniform definitions of clinical data. We also affect the media on which data is stored by managing paper, constructing database content, and ensuring that legal standards are applied when using new technologies.

"Management" in the HIM context describes our unique blending of knowledge of clinical, management, and informatics principles. The domain description details the planning, informatics, and technical concepts of managing health information in which HIM professionals excel. The skills and functions used to accomplish these concepts are discussed in terms of the unique impact the HIM professional applies. Examples of this impact include influencing national and organizational policy-making, improving data quality and accuracy, and protecting patients' right to privacy.

Reflecting Our Diversity

The professional definition reflects all of us, regardless of how we are applying our knowledge. Many HIM professionals have used their HIM expertise to move into diverse roles for which they might not have been originally trained. As we continue to move into new arenas and settings, we can use the definition to explain what we do and our unique background and training. And we can use it as the basis for future role development.

It is true as a profession, we are not what we were in 1928. And soon we will be saying, "we are not what we were in 2001." We have shaped our profession by grasping opportunities, rising to challenges, and creatively applying what we know to ride the waves of healthcare change. We will always be much more than what we were yesterday.

[Health Information Management: Professional Definition](#)

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Note

1. Huffman, Edna K. *Manual for Medical Record Librarians*. 5th ed. Berwyn, IL: Physicians' Record Company, 1963, p. 23.

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