Not-So-Strange Bedfellows: Why HIM, IT Are Becoming Fast Friends

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by Ruth Carol

Spending a lot of time with the IT department lately? As HIM processes become automated and demand increasingly sophisticated technology, HIM professionals are making IT professionals their closest allies.

Whether you're acquiring an electronic master patient index, implementing a transcription system, or maintaining a clinical data repository, chances are you're collaborating with information technology (IT) professionals. Throughout HIM, tasks that were once entirely paper-based have migrated to computers. Indeed, between HIPAA and the electronic health record (EHR), HIM professionals are relying on IT—and IT experts—more than ever before. As a result, the two professions have forged close working relationships in recent years.

"When the leadership of hospitals began to look at the demands for quality information services and the delivery of health information to caregivers, it became obvious that HIM departments needed to be working more closely with IT to assist in meeting those needs," says Roberta Baranda, RHIA, director of HIM at Children's Hospital Central California in Madera. Baranda herself noticed a few years back that she began talking with IT personnel much more frequently than patient accounting personnel.

According to Deborah Kohn, MPH, RHIA, CHE, CPHIMS, FHIMSS, principal of Dak Systems Consulting in San Mateo, CA, "Over the years, many HIM professionals have told me that they cannot implement IT solutions in their departments or across the enterprise without the services of a responsive IT department. In addition, several CIOs have told me that they cannot manage IT across the enterprise without the assistance of IT-able and knowledgeable HIM professionals."

Technology Takes Off

Rapidly evolving technology and the need to protect the health information it houses are the forces behind this alignment between HIM and IT.

"HIM and IT have always worked closely together because of HIM's data management role and its reliance on IT to provide or maintain the technology. But I would say much more so within the past 10 years, especially with the computerized patient record and now HIPAA," notes Maureen Larson, RHIA, IS systems administrator for Tenet Pennsylvania Region in Philadelphia.

As Julie Roussel, RHIA, director of HIM and information systems at NorthShore Regional Medical Center in Slidell, LA, points out, "The HIM department is no longer a traditional paper environment, as there is more and more hardware and software available now to do what we need to do in HIM electronically."

And that transition requires the assistance of IT. "We're on the cutting edge of technology, and we want to eventually become paperless," says Margaret Miller, RHIA, HIM systems administrator at St. Joseph Mercy Health Center in Hot Springs, AR. "You can't do that without IT support."

The CIO's Influence

An organization's CIO plays a key role in solidifying the relationship between these two departments that have sometimes found themselves at odds, largely due to their different approaches for tackling the same objective.

"There is never a time when a strategic IT initiative is discussed that the HIM director is not at the table," says Baranda, whose HIM department is in the IT division. "The reason for that is because I believe my CIO represents a changing mentality among CIOs across the country. He respects the different perspectives that need to be considered, beyond the technical, that an HIM director often contributes to a strategic IT initiative. Those include our 'what ifs' about the legal implications, electronic signature and authentication, HIPAA, definitions of a legal record, and our appreciation for all users of the medical record."

Joan Hicks, MS, RHIA, director of information services at UAB Health Services in Birmingham, AL, agrees. "It's not about the technology, it's about the information. That's the philosophy being embraced by this department because our CIO understands that. He understands that you can install the biggest, slickest, most expensive piece of technology that exists, and it will fall on its face if you don't have good information practices to support it."

In fact, it's not uncommon for the HIM department to report to the CIO. "I have already seen the split of HIM departments, such that the reimbursement and revenue cycle management functions (including coding editing) report to the CFO—which I believe they should—and all the records, data, and information collection/analysis functions report to the CIO," says Kohn.

New Knowledge Needed

In order to gain support from and credibility with their IT peers, HIM professionals need to first and foremost learn some IT language and concepts. Just how much IT knowledge and technical skill an HIM professional should obtain depends on how technology-oriented the organization is, which often hinges on its size, and whether the individual desires to assume a leadership role regarding information systems. The larger the organization and desire to be a leader in this arena, the more knowledge is beneficial.

"One organization may be very technology-oriented and you may have to work hard to keep up. Another organization may want to use more proven technology, so you may have time to learn," notes William Woloszyn, RHIA, director of privacy and security at Integris Health in Oklahoma City. "That means that some HIM professionals will need very little IT knowledge to excel in a team environment, while others may really have to get engaged."

The level of detail should be commensurate with the level of management the HIM professional serves within the organization. "Most technical people don't expect management to have the level of understanding in a specialty that they do," says Jeremy Meller, MBA, CIO at the Iowa Heart Center in Des Moines. But because HIM professionals work with the flow of health information, it's important that they understand how information is stored and transmitted between systems. That includes having an understanding of how databases and networks work. They should know, for example, what an SQL query, HL7 interface, and file server are, as well as the various operating systems on a personal computer.

"We simply can't do an effective job of managing information today and developing strategies for managing information in the future without understanding the infrastructure for managing it," says Deborah Green, MBA, RHIA, senior vice president and CIO for Centennial HealthCare Corporation in Atlanta, GA. "HIM professionals who demonstrate a solid level of comfort with the technology aspects of information capture, access, management, storage, transmission, and security will emerge as leaders in HIM as well as in IT."

Those HIM professionals who want to assume leadership roles should understand the essence of strategic IT initiatives, adds Kohn. This includes understanding how such initiatives affect the organization and department, what they cost, and what benefits may be realized. "HIM leaders do not need to be bits and bytes knowledgeable, but they do need to understand the principles of both manual and electronic systems analysis," she says.

Although much of this knowledge can be learned on the job, some HIM professionals who cross over into the IT world feel it is necessary to gain additional formal education.

When Crystal Stallings, RHIA, decided to move into IT from HIM, she began pursuing an advanced degree. The chief privacy officer and information technologies director at Skaggs Community Health Center in Springfield, MO, Stallings will earn her master's in computer information resource management this summer after three years of night classes. "There are a lot of HIM professionals and other clinical professionals in IT who haven't gone that route and they're happy with their role, but it's limited to the scope of clinical and data systems. If you want to have more of an impact on the organization's information systems, then you have to go for advanced education or certification."

Existing Expertise an Advantage

HIM professionals can also draw on their existing knowledge and skills to work more closely with IT.

Effective implementation of new systems, processes, and programs requires good project management—skills that HIM professionals possess and can use to promote a team atmosphere. "Many HIM professionals, due to their ability to appreciate detail while managing the big picture, make great project managers on initiatives involving healthcare operations and IT," says Green.

"I can't think of someone who has a more broad-based knowledge of a healthcare organization than an HIM professional," asserts Baranda. "We have the training of a nurse, except for the bedside. We have the training of a basic IT person. We have an administrator's mentality. We have a way of organizing data so that people understand it and typically have excellent presentation skills. We are trained as leaders so we make great educators."

Even those who have crossed over find that their HIM background is invaluable in the IT world. Woloszyn says his HIM training influences many of the decisions he makes today. "In IT, we typically think that because we have the technology available, we can do certain things. But with my HIM background, I say, we can do them, but should we? There's real value in that."

The key to working closely with IT, according to Woloszyn, is to acknowledge the different approaches taken by both departments. "Both HIM and IT professionals are very detail oriented, but our focus is slightly different. IT is in the business of making electronic solutions happen. HIM is in the business of ensuring proper use of information. If the two can agree on a common goal, it will relieve some of the tensions between the two groups."

Green concurs. "Demonstrating common ground and common objectives is a good way to build bridges and there are daily opportunities to demonstrate those commonalities. Both areas have overriding concerns around data quality and integrity; authorized access and use of information; and an appreciation of the need for adherence to consistent practices and procedures."

As technology to manage health information continues to evolve and healthcare leaders embrace the notion that any project involving information systems is enhanced by the collaboration between the HIM and IT disciplines, HIM professionals will forge even closer working relationships with their IT colleagues.

"We will see increasing common ground between the two areas, but we will also see ways to craft the role of the future HIM professional as distinct from IT," concludes Green. "To help ensure that the HIM role evolves, as opposed to being swallowed into a technology role, HIM professionals must assert themselves as experts in data definition, capture, management, use, analysis and interpretation, and most importantly as health information strategists for their organizations."

Turn to CoP for HIM, IT Insight

Have a question about how to use IT resources to tackle implementation of an electronic medical record? Not sure how to describe that new HIM/IT position? Visit the HIM/IT Community of Practice (CoP) at www.ahima.org. The HIM/IT CoP enables members to:

- network with peers
- share best practices
- exchange policies and procedures
- search for other members in similar situations
- access members-only resources and references
- solve problems
- find links to useful sites

The HIM/IT CoP was designed to assist all HIM professionals who work in an IT role, whether in a healthcare organization's HIM or IT department or for healthcare IT vendors or consultants, says Kohn, who serves as the Community facilitator. "I was seeing hundreds of our very capable and IT-

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savvy professionals in these roles who lacked direction about issues, such as how to implement systems, what to look for in acquiring systems, and how to write job descriptions for new positions." The CoP allows them to share experiences, ideas, and knowledge, she says.

Get a Grip on Techno-Speak

HIM professionals should have a grasp of technological terms and a basic understanding of IT concepts in order to better interact with IT professionals. Here's how you can add to your IT knowledge:

- Read technology magazines
- Access educational information on the Internet, using such Web sites as www.CIO.com, www.computerworld.com, and www.healthdatamanagement.com
- Attend educational sessions focusing on IT issues offered by HIM professional organizations at the local, state, and national level
- Keep current with IT trends, such as wireless technology used to connect off-site transcriptionists and personal digital assistants used by physicians
- Conduct at least two site visits annually to organizations that have implemented an information system that you think you would like to implement at your institution to ensure that the ideas you're proposing are viable

Foster a team culture by showing an interest in IT issues. Some of the following suggestions can help build bridges:

- Volunteer for IT-related projects
- Offer to exchange department in-services with the IT director. For example, provide HIM basics to the IT staff in exchange for networking basics
- Give presentations about the relevance of the collaboration between HIM and IT at orientation sessions
- Attend technical meetings, even if you're a silent participant
- Align yourself with IT peers and mentors

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