

# Position Yourself to be a Player

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*by Shirley Eichenwald, MBA, RRA*

As a result of the rapidly changing healthcare information systems environment, a variety of career opportunities are emerging for HIM professionals. This is a sure sign that the transformation of the HIM profession, envisioned for more than a decade, is actually happening. To take full advantage of these opportunities, HIM professionals must be prepared to exhibit new, heightened competencies. HIM professionals who want to be players in today's healthcare organizations must embrace four basic concepts:

- lifelong learning
- accomplishing it together
- visioning and strategic thinking
- stepping up to the situation

Lifelong learning (i.e., professional development or continuing education) and accomplishing it together (i.e., teaming with others to achieve results) are concepts that have been traditionally incorporated into the practice of successful HIM professionals. Contemporary HIM practice simply calls us to give enhanced attention to these two concepts because:

- our requisite professional knowledge base is expanding rapidly, especially in the discipline of healthcare data and information management within the emerging field of healthcare informatics
- our requisite teaming efforts are increasingly multi-professional in character and involve cross-boundary interactions to gain consensus and lead system-wide resolution to problems

On the other hand, visioning and strategic thinking and stepping up to the situation are concepts that have not been widely embraced in the past as critical to success within the traditional HIM practice environment. For this reason, these two concepts now deserve extra attention by individuals who want to fully prepared themselves to engage in the new challenges and opportunities offered in the HIM field.

## Visioning and Strategic Thinking

Just as in any business today, healthcare organizations are questioning everything they do in an effort to assure short-term survival and long-term growth and prosperity. In this context, it is not possible for any professional to be content without questioning and analyzing the status quo in search of performance improvement opportunities. If HIM professionals continue to perform their jobs in the same old ways, they will not meet organizational expectations, such as proactively anticipating and leading efforts that help the organization adapt successfully to a changing business environment.

In order to meet these expectations and increase our value to the organization(s) we serve, we must become strategic thinkers. Strategic thinkers are characterized by these types of behaviors:<sup>1</sup>

- stay focused on the future and envision opportunities for positive changes and new successes within that future
- engage in "boundary spanning," in which they look beyond themselves, their profession, and their industry to discover emerging trends
- take what they learn during boundary spanning to forecast technological, demographic, political, and regulatory changes that will have an impact on their organization or profession
- envision the future state of the organization or profession based on their assessment
- advocate for the vision
- recognize that future goals are achieved incrementally, so they map out the necessary steps for leading the organization or profession toward the vision

- remain dissatisfied—in other words, they continue to question, listen, discuss, and read—to shape the vision as knowledge is gained

Advancing a vision certainly requires planning, focus, commitment, and patience over an extended period of time. Advancing a vision for change also requires the cooperation and participation of others. Which means that success is largely dependent upon your abilities to accomplish it together. Key steps to successful team accomplishments include:

- keeping everyone focused on the big picture
- tolerating ambiguity
- building trusting relationships
- negotiating to achieve win-win outcomes
- listening actively
- effectively using your circle of influence

## **Step up to the Situation**

Career progression for a professional involves taking advantage of more demanding, challenging, important or rewarding assignments. The evolution of one's professional career is largely determined by the possession of a valued set of knowledge and competencies coupled with a positive reputation. HIM professionals can enhance their ability to successfully step up to any career-enhancing situation when it presents itself by developing their competencies in a few key areas:

### **Think out of the Box**

Break out of the normal model used to think about something. Admittedly, such thinking is very difficult to do under the best of circumstances, because an individual's framework for decision making is often enmeshed with past experiences and beliefs. As a result, it is easy to limit your ability to see other perspectives by preventing yourself from letting go of the past. Practice free thinking—envision what could and should exist in your ideal world. You may find enjoyment, renewed energy, and heightened enthusiasm in this process.

### **Get Involved**

A professional must make broad contributions to an organization to increase their value and build a good reputation. Careers are frequently advanced because of a spontaneous contribution made at a meeting or a hallway conversation that demonstrated the knowledge and perspective of the person presenting the idea. Getting involved will undoubtedly require HIM professionals to engage in self-initiated, self-promotional activities within an organization or a community. Getting involved also can lead to invitations for other presentations or volunteer opportunities.

### **Get Good at Cross Talk**

Communicate and share ideas openly and often across the boundaries of organizational units and professional groups. Very few major tasks can be done at work today without having to cross organizational and professional boundaries. Cross talk helps create the synergies required to truly make things happen. Indeed, cross talkers offer and receive many benefits—not the least of which is a good rapport between individual employees and between entire departments.

### **Speak up and Advocate**

Contributing our unique value as HIM professionals is what professional life is all about. Advocating involves modeling—through words and actions—your ideal principles, beliefs, positions and standards. When issues arise that relate to the current or future state of clinical data collection, data storage, data distribution, or data reporting, make sure the HIM perspective is included. Let your voice-and your point of view-be heard, whether it involves distributing an interesting article or sharing a set of AHIMA guidelines to assist someone with a project. An HIM professional must be seen across the organization as a reliable professional resource—someone who can bring trustworthy, useful information and insightful perspective to the table—especially when issues related to healthcare data and information management are on the agenda.

### **Prioritize**

Stay focused on priorities, because the choices you make every day dictate how you will spend your limited time. Using your time effectively can mean the difference in how you perceive your job, as it is a driving factor in professional success. Stephen Covey presents an effective approach to setting priorities and guiding our daily choices in the use of our time. The proposal: We create plans for our own expenditure of time, based on an honest appraisal of basic components of our lives. The basic components are the various roles we have in life and what we want to achieve in each of those roles. Covey then suggests we carve out a schedule that realistically attributes time devoted to each role. Ultimately, how you choose to spend your time determines what you will achieve.

We live in a professional world that offers more opportunities and challenges than ever before. Engage in strategic thinking to create a vision for our practice and our careers. Make strategic choices about what is important and remember to make time pursue those choices. Speak up and advocate for the core HIM values, principles, and standards. Engage with others to establish partnerships and find creative solutions to new problems. Your professional success depends on it.

## Notes

1. Duncan, W. J., P.M. Ginter, and L.E. Swayne. *Strategic Management of Health Care Organizations*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1995, chapters 1-5.
2. Covey, Steven R. *First Things First*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1994, p. 321.

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