

Professional Development Plans in Action

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by Gina Rollins

Today, **Susan Parker**, MEd, RHIA, owns Seagate Consulting, an HIM recruiting firm in Wrightsville Beach, NC, but years ago she was a newly minted HIM graduate with a job that involved quality assurance. Parker liked the position but found more satisfaction in the night class she was teaching. It was then, at age 22, that she began putting together a plan to become an HIM educator.

“Education jobs at the back of the Journal were the ones I wanted to keep doing, and then I thought of other things I’d like to do, such as serve on a state board,” she recalls. Eventually she worked as an RHIA program director for 10 years and pursued a master’s degree in education, all part of her plan.

Later, Parker and her husband put together a life plan that outlined where they wanted to live, the lifestyle they wanted, and the type of environment in which they wanted to raise their children. This prompted a move to North Carolina and caused Parker to renew her professional development plan. “I talked to recruiters and decided [recruiting was] what I wanted to do. I knew my plan had to involve one-on-one contact with people.”

Even after operating Seagate since 1989, serving on AHIMA’s Board of Directors between 2000 and 2003, and continuing to volunteer as a career counselor for AHIMA members, Parker still makes a list of professional goals each January. “It keeps me focused,” she explains. “In my recruiting and career counseling I’ve found that people who talk about their goals don’t attain them at the same rate as people who write them down.”

Parker also has seen time and again that professional development plans anchor people through the ups and downs of life and career. “Even when someone is in a job they have to be in [for family or income considerations], they can serve on committees in areas of interest at local, state, or national levels and still keep moving forward. A plan will pull you through the rough spots,” she contends.

Doreen Swadley, MA, MBA, RHIA, believes that without a career development plan she wouldn’t be where she is today. Swadley, assistant executive director for HIM at Scott and White Memorial Hospital in Temple, TX, began putting together a plan while working in healthcare in Boston during the 1980s. “I had a master’s degree in sociology, but I felt it wouldn’t help advance my career and that I would go from one mediocre job to another,” she recalls. As Swadley began considering what else she might do, she explored the HIM field and liked what she saw. “It was right after DRGs were implemented, and HIM was becoming more financially oriented and computerized. I liked where it was going,” she explains.

Swadley went back to school, received her RHIA, and began plotting her next move. “I already had healthcare experience, so it was important that I start at the director level,” she says. Swadley also knew she wanted to keep a broader focus. Eventually she earned an MBA, another move that has served her well. “I realized a lot of what HIM deals with does not have to do with HIM. The MBA has helped me go in and figure out people and situations quickly. My learning curve is not as steep as it might otherwise be,” she contends.

Swadley’s professional development plan remains a work in progress as she plots a pathway to an executive position with responsibilities beyond HIM. Part of doing so involves looking for opportunities to take on new responsibilities and promote HIM involvement in task forces, committees, and other venues. “I keep pushing my role forward in the organization until someone says no, and I’m surprised at how little they say no,” she notes.

A professional development plan helped Swadley envision what she wanted to be doing five and 10 years into the future and then put together the necessary pieces. She also notes that such planning also opens HIM professionals to the possibility of working in different settings, an important consideration in staying abreast of industry changes and widening career opportunities. A plan should also encourage the flexibility to consider opportunities as they arise and to adjust in light of industry and life changes. “Always be prepared to retool,” advises Swadley.

Joan McKenzie-Hobbs, MBA, RHIA, is vice president of contract services and regulatory affairs at Thorek Memorial Hospital in Chicago, IL. From the earliest stages of her career she knew that she desired an executive-level position, and a professional development plan helped her dream become reality.

Part of McKenzie-Hobbs's plan included taking every opportunity to educate herself, develop leadership skills, and take on new assignments. "I was always involved in committees and continuously worked on improving my leadership skills," she recalls. "It helps to ask for additional responsibilities; however, this is usually granted following successes in current assignments." Also critical was having role models, especially executives with HIM backgrounds who had broader responsibilities. "I knew early on that as an RHIA I was not limited to a manager-level position in health information," she says.

A native of Kingston, Jamaica, McKenzie-Hobbs received a bachelor's degree in medical records administration from Illinois State University and started her career at Cook County Hospital in Chicago before coming to Thorek in 1994. After arriving, she realized an advanced degree was necessary to become a healthcare executive, so she incorporated earning an MBA from Roosevelt University into her plan.

Knowing there was a broader purpose for the MBA kept her going despite the pressures of her position, having one child, and expecting another. "I was very determined. There are always stumbling blocks, but when you have a goal it will keep you focused, and you'll do what it takes to keep your eyes on the prize," she notes.

Another aspect of career planning is the people factor. "It is very important to form good working relationships and value feedback from supervisors, peers, and subordinates; it's a good indication of how you are being perceived," advises McKenzie-Hobbs. "It's also important that senior leadership recognizes the importance of your work and contributions to the organization."

In addition to the direct impact on their careers, Parker, Swadley, and McKenzie-Hobbs report that professional development plans have kept them connected with the broader healthcare field through reading, continuing education, and networking, thereby alerting them to new challenges and roles for HIM.

"That's the beauty of this profession," says Parker. "It keeps on changing."

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