

# Professional Development: How to Get Started, How to Keep Growing

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By Genna Rollins

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*Professional development is a must for HIM professionals who want to keep on top of changes in the healthcare industry. Multiple venues provide professional development opportunities for those looking to grow their careers.*

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Sweeping changes in the healthcare industry make ongoing professional development a must for HIM professionals who want to keep abreast of the latest trends and ensure their practice reflects the most current concepts and technologies.

Investing in oneself will open doors of opportunity and learning, provide a broader perspective both about specific roles and HIM generally, and make all the difference in one's long-term career prospects, according to HIM leaders.

"A career without professional development is basically a job," says Kathy Willis, MBA, RHIT, CCS, regional vice president for Anthelio Healthcare Solutions in Dallas. "If you don't commit to professional development, you miss out on so many opportunities to network with peers to learn innovative approaches to existing challenges and to learn about future career opportunities.

"If we're just focused on our jobs, we lose the enterprise view of healthcare and may find our skills and roles obsolete. By networking and engaging in professional development, we'll be positioned to lead our profession regardless of what changes occur in the healthcare industry," she says.

Willis also is president of the Texas HIM Association.

## A Question of Time

As important as professional development may be, however, many HIM professionals feel overwhelmed and don't see a simple way to carve out time for themselves in the hubbub of the transition to ICD-10-CM/PCS, implementation of EHRs and health information exchange networks, and navigating meaningful use criteria.

Audrey Chase, RHIA, agrees that time is scarce, but contends that mustering the will to focus on professional development is an essential step in the process.

"It's so easy to say, 'I'm so busy, I can't,' but if anybody knows how to prioritize and manage their time, it's people in HIM," she says. "That was drilled into us all through our education, and it's up to us to make the time." Chase is director of HIM and compliance at Doshier Memorial Hospital in Southport, NC, and president of the North Carolina HIM Association (NCHIMA).

Chase definitely took her own advice, planning well in advance to take over the reins of NCHIMA. "I knew when my name was put on the ballot for president-elect that I would have to manage and modify my schedule," she recalls. "I planned it out and delegated some of my work responsibilities. It took two years."

While Chase's example may be extreme, she is not alone in emphasizing that small investments of time can pay big career dividends.

"We all have ebbs and flows when we have more or less time to devote. So you engage at the level you can at any particular time," Willis says. "I guarantee you'll get more out of it than you give."

## It's All about Association

One of the best places to start down the professional development road without necessarily becoming overloaded is to participate in local, state, and national HIM association activities.

"That's where I started," recalls Kathy Arner, RHIT, CCS, LPN, CPC, CPMA, MCS, a senior coding coordinator, risk adjustment, for Geisinger Health Plan in Geisinger, PA. "I was invited to a local HIM meeting and encouraged by other people to participate.

"Now, after being involved for so long, I can definitely say that if it hadn't been for our local and state associations, as well as AHIMA, I wouldn't have gotten out and done so many of the things I've done."

From that first Northeastern Pennsylvania HIM Association meeting, Arner has gone on to serve in a variety of roles in the Pennsylvania HIM Association (PHIMA) and in AHIMA, including a stint as president of PHIMA.

This year she is co-chair of the AHIMA Professional Development and Recognition Team, one of six House of Delegates teams charged with addressing different aspects of AHIMA's strategic plan. The team focuses on identifying the learning needs of HIM professionals and assisting in the development of resources to promote the value of AHIMA credentials.

## AHIMA and More

AHIMA offers a smorgasbord of professional development activities, literally something for everyone at every stage of their careers, and in a variety of formats, according to Willis.

"We all have different ways of learning, and AHIMA is just overflowing with information that can help us grow and connect. There are all types of opportunities available," she says.

Consider the range of options from just a few AHIMA program offerings:

- Accessing online networking and problem solving through the Communities of Practice
- Hearing industry leaders give their views on cutting-edge topics through the Thought Leaders lecture series
- Taking e-learning courses and e-assessments via the distance education campus
- Attending lectures and networking with colleagues in person at the annual convention and exhibit

If AHIMA is the mother lode of HIM professional development, Arner, Chase, and Willis all stress that AHIMA's Component State Associations (CSAs) also are great sources for personal and career advancement.

"I always tell students it all starts from home. That's so important because the local and state association programs give you access to fellow professionals and knowledge from local leading experts," says Willis.

Chase emphasizes that local HIM meetings are an excellent way to start networking, which is the foundation of professional development.

"It's as simple as attending meetings and signing up to volunteer for a committee that interests you. In the case of NCHIMA, that would put you in contact with a minimum of three people who'd be working right in your area and who could guide you to other people and opportunities," she explains.

Arner agrees that serving on AHIMA or CSA committees will jump-start the networking process, not only with colleagues participating in the same activities, but also with others who learn about the committee's activities and members. For example, she frequently is contacted by individuals who have found her through her participation in PHIMA or AHIMA initiatives.

"I get calls because of my credentials. Someone will be looking to speak with someone who has one of my credentials, and they'll see that I'm a PHIMA delegate or serving on one of the other committees I'm on and call me for advice," she explains.

"When I speak to students and in other forums, I always encourage them to contact people who have a credential they're interested in."

## The Local Angle

AHIMA and CSA meetings provide a great opportunity not only to learn about emerging industry trends but also to get to know local leaders in a relaxed atmosphere.

Attending CSA-sponsored functions "helps you understand the larger healthcare ecosystem," explains Willis. "You can see the provider differentiation that's taking place and how that might impact you, your career plans, and professional development needs."

For instance, there might be trends among rehabilitation facilities in your region to implement new technologies, increase focus on quality reporting, or change coding systems. All of these circumstances would have implications for the skills of value to these organizations, Willis says.

CSA meetings also provide an excellent forum for one-on-one interaction with vendors likely to have insight into emerging HIM practices.

"Vendors are often cutting edge, offering new services and technologies," Willis notes. "You can find out what they are offering and ask yourself whether you have the skill set that goes with that."

For individuals more interested in one-on-one discussion and feedback about their career interests, AHIMA and many CSAs also offer opportunities for mentoring. In the case of AHIMA, students and new members can tap into the Action Community for Excellence (ACE) database to identify ACE members who have agreed to serve as mentors.

State-level programs vary but serve the same purpose, according to Chase. "The idea is to put you in contact with a volunteer who can either help you themselves or put you in contact with someone who knows more about your particular interests," she says. "This can help whether you're just starting, moving into a new part of the state, or just trying to figure out the next step in your career."

In addition to learning from others, Arner stresses the benefits of being on the teaching side of the education equation. Making presentations at CSA or AHIMA meetings not only showcases the speaker as a content expert on a particular aspect of HIM practice, but also helps boost his or her recognition in the HIM community, leading to more networking opportunities and new job prospects.

In Arner's experience, one speaking engagement often leads to others. As an example, she recently spoke about ICD-10-CM and was approached by a member of the audience to make a similar presentation at another organization.

## Beyond AHIMA

Though AHIMA and its CSAs are the foundation of HIM-related professional development, individuals really interested in stretching their knowledge and skills will do well to participate in other associations that have affinity with HIM roles and responsibilities. For example, Arner also is involved in organizations that focus on coding and claims issues.

Willis agrees that there is much to be gained from associations that share interests with HIM. "We can really benefit from their perspective, which is different from ours," she explains. "If we go to their meetings, it's an opportunity to learn new skills and understand our relevancy from their point of view. For example, we could ask how they would envision using HIM professionals during implementation of an EHR."

Another way to learn about the knowledge and skills valued in HIM is to keep abreast of the job market by networking with colleagues and through AHIMA's online Career Assist job board and other job sites.

"Look at what they're asking for in terms of skills and education. That will clue you in to where the field is going and where you need to focus your professional development," Arner says. "For example, years ago, you'd have never seen an ad for an auditor with a background in HIM, but now you do."

## Is a Career Plan Necessary?

The importance of developing a formal career plan is a beauty-in-the-eyes-of-the-beholder kind of question, with some people arguing that career plans are essential, and others not valuing them as highly. Willis is in the former camp.

"How will you know how to get where you'd like to be in 15 years if you don't have a plan? Anything that takes up a major part of your life requires a plan," she contends.

On the other hand, Arner believes the relevancy of career planning depends somewhat on where one lives and the avenues available there for education and advancement.

"I haven't had a formal career plan. I had to pay my own way in terms of my education, so that limited some of my choices," she says. "I also live in a rural area where we have more limited educational opportunities, whereas people in metropolitan areas can walk down the street to access education. I almost would have had to quit my job at one point to get another degree."

Chase also doesn't believe career plans are make-or-break propositions, unless an individual's sights are set quite high.

"I don't think you necessarily need a career plan. Things are changing so quickly, there could be something you've been planning for years, but the requirements for that type of job might evolve very quickly," she explains.

"The exception is if you want a C-level position [such as chief executive officer, chief operating officer, or chief information officer]. In that case, you'll have to have a plan because of the education and career steps required to qualify for those types of jobs."

## Bridging the Gap

Whether you develop a formal career plan or merely want to identify areas where you need to grow professionally, Willis recommends starting with a personal assessment.

"You should think about what's important to you. Some people are more interested in tactical issues like coding; others are more attracted to strategic challenges like planning and leadership; others prefer to be individual contributors rather than leading a team," she notes. "The type of organization you want to work in—for example, the government, a vendor, research institution, or hospital—is another consideration."

Overlaying these preferences with the broader picture of healthcare will give you an idea of the knowledge and skills you possess versus those important for the type of position you're interested in. This kind of gap analysis will help focus the direction of your professional development, Willis says.

With so much support and so many resources available, the sky's the limit for HIM professionals seeking to advance their careers, making it incumbent on them to give and receive in equal measures, according to Arner.

"Take every opportunity you can get, don't ever stop learning, and don't hold back from teaching others," she says.

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