Project Management Plus: Project Management Skills Create Opportunities for HIM Professionals

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By Chris Dimick

Adding a project management credential to their professional arsenal opens HIM professionals to new opportunities both within their facilities and in a range of nonprovider settings.

The HIM professional in Kimberly Miller knows how certain ICD-10 codes will affect billing denials. The project manager in her is focused on meeting milestones in the revenue cycle's ICD-10 transition that will ensure on-time, successful completion.

As the ICD-10 project manager at Centura Health, Miller, MS, RHIA, PMP, routinely uses her HIM training to perform her project management duties. The ICD-10 transition has proven the perfect opportunity for HIM-trained project managers to demonstrate how effectively the two disciplines weave together.

Many HIM professionals also have found that adding project management skills and credentials like the PMP is a professional complement that leads to new and interesting career opportunities.

Highlighted below are three HIM-trained professionals whose project management studies landed them jobs in the healthcare, government, and retail industries. While they likely would not have been hired for their jobs without obtaining project management degrees and credentials, they also agree they would not be as successful in those roles without their HIM experience.

Managing the ICD-10 Transition

A major project like the ICD-10-CM/PCS transition is a perfect match for an HIM professional with formal project management training. The transition touches every corner of a healthcare facility, requiring expert project management guidance to ensure successful, on-time completion. In the same right, the ICD code set falls under an HIM professional's expertise and has a major impact on HIM operations.

HIM-trained project managers like Miller have become invaluable resources during this multiyear, multimillion-dollar conversion.

After graduating from an HIM program in 1994, Miller started her career as an HIM supervisor. In 1999 she moved to information technology, serving as IT director at a healthcare facility in Colorado while at times dually managing HIM.

Much of her day-to-day work as IT director involved a form of project management. Formally studying the project management discipline seemed like a good way to improve her performance and future professional endeavors, Miller says.

"I felt like in order to be marketable and useable within that organization I needed those [project management] credentials to keep moving forward," she says.

Going back to school online with Denver University, Miller took a six-course certification program over a year and a half that prepared her to sit for the PMP exam. She earned the PMP in November 2009.

ICD-10 has been Miller's main focus since starting at Centura in February 2011-her first full-time project management position.

Any leadership role, including HIM or IT director, uses project management skills such as budgeting, managing resources, and plotting stages of a department project. Studying project management formalized those skills for Miller by augmenting her past knowledge with professional project management techniques. She studied methods for producing a project schedule, adapting tracking tools to measure success and estimate completion dates, applying projective budgeting, and strategic planning.

For the ICD-10 project, Miller has been working with a consulting company to develop a readiness assessment. Once the assessment is completed, she will use the details to create a detailed project plan for the implementation that will involve the project management methods she studied.

Once the ICD-10 project is complete, Miller hopes to transition into a project management office role where she would continue to work in day-to-day project management and also hold administrative functions, building project management methodology and infrastructure into the everyday operations of the facility.

What Is Project Management?

Project management is a professional discipline with a body of knowledge, training track, and accredited certifications. Leading advocacy for the discipline is the Project Management Institute (PMI), a nonprofit membership association that maintains a professional practice body of knowledge, fosters development of the profession, and maintains project management credentials including the Project Management Professional (PMP).

The PMP is considered the most important industry-recognized certification for project managers, according to PMI. The credential demonstrates the holder's experience, education, and competency in successfully leading and directing projects. It is estimated that 500,000 people hold PMI credentials and work in nearly every industry from healthcare to telecommunications to construction.

Project managers are tasked with delivering to their employers expected benefits and value through effective planning, organization, and risk mitigation. They align expected results to an organization's key initiatives.

Project managers may have many different responsibilities, says Neil Langley, MBA, RHIA, PMP, a project lead at Walmart. These include:

- Keeping all parties informed of the project status, including schedule, cost, and quality targets
- Building successful relationships with business customers
- Ensuring projects achieve target return on investment
- Working with resource managers to staff projects
- "Standing up" or kicking off and supporting projects through implementation of project management software that tracks its lifecycle and financials
- Generating and maintaining project momentum from start to finish
- Capturing lessons learned during the project
- Obtaining all necessary sign-offs from project stakeholders

Because project management is one of the few professions that spans all sectors, both public and private, it is routinely paired with other industry credentials, according to PMI.

Managing Data Analysis at a State Government

Starla Ledbetter, MHSA, RHIA, PMP, gained project management skills to advance her career at the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development (OSHPD).

Ledbetter earned her certificate in project management from the University of California at Davis in 2002 and since has been promoted from a medical record consultant to managing OSHPD's data management office and leading several high-profile data analysis projects.

"There is not a strong career path for specific HIM-credentialed folks within state government [compared to the private sector]," Ledbetter says. So in order to keep moving up, she says, she added to her skill set.

OSHPD analyzes discharge data, emergency and ambulatory surgery encounter data, financial data, and other information that California's hospitals are required to report by law. The office makes the data publicly available to promote better public health knowledge and health outcomes. OSHPD also audits the data for errors, and it works with the facilities to correct their mistakes and conduct research based on the information.

Ledbetter began on her path to project management because she wanted to do her job better. The department was undergoing a major renovation in the way it received and processed discharge data from hospitals, because old manual methods delayed the information at times up to two years. The automation of this system would be a multiyear project and affect the more than 500 hospitals that reported data to OSHPD. The project was big and important, and Ledbetter wanted in.

In order to help manage the project, Ledbetter knew she needed more training on project management. She earned her certificate and was able to successfully serve as the project manager on the IT implementation.

"While my RHIA background helped me in many ways understand the healthcare data and understand the challenges the reporting hospitals faced, where I felt I was a little weak was how to really set up and manage a project of this magnitude, to make sure that it was going to be a success," she says.

Ledbetter used the training as professional development, expanding her skill set to open up new opportunities in her current job.

With the growing number of HIM-centric projects such as EHR implementations sweeping the nation, Ledbetter felt project management skills could come in handy should she ever leave OSHPD and work in the private healthcare sector.

"Implementing anything like that, anywhere, is going to take some project management skills," she says. "So I felt that it would be something useful to me whether I stayed with this government office or if I moved on somewhere else."

Most of the projects Ledbetter manages deal with healthcare data, so she routinely calls upon her HIM background. She recently has undertaken the role of project manager for OSHPD's ICD-10 transition, a huge project that involves hunting down the various current uses of ICD-9 data.

Ledbetter has found ICD-9 codes in everything from the usual (discharge data reports) to the unique (utilization of hospice services). Through it all, her expertise on how healthcare uses medical records has given her an edge in project management held by few of her government counterparts.

"I have used my HIM skills in every role I have had here," she says.

Managing within a Corporation

Hockey great Wayne Gretzky said the key to his success on the ice was not getting to where the puck is, but getting to where it is going.

That mantra has been adopted by Neil Langley, MBA, RHIA, PMP, a project lead at Walmart, based in Bentonville, AK.

The path from healthcare to retail was gradual for Langley, who studied health information management, earned his RHIA, and upon graduation in 2001 implemented EHRs and health software systems.

But during his 10 years working in healthcare, Langley took every opportunity he could to hone his project management skills while working for vendors and corporate healthcare giants like HCA.

While studying HIM, Langley saw the career potential in healthcare's coming computerization, and he focused his training on network computing and electronic information management. Project management was necessary in every software implementation, and this experience led Langley to formally study the discipline and earn his PMP credential in 2005.

"The PMP was a natural progression to be able to effectively engage on the implementation side of business that now dominates the project list for hospitals," he says.

Looking ahead, Langley saw the healthcare puck sliding into the retail sector, and he wanted in on the play. He landed the job at Walmart in January 2011.

"I believed being with a top retailer who is very interested in, committed to, and doing a good job in the healthcare space would only serve me better, having that perspective to draw upon, rather than for everything to always be healthcare-centric in my [career] view," Langley says.

Walmart has begun offering healthcare-based services in some of its locations through in-store clinics and the Walmart pharmacy. Langley has started working on a HIPAA-related data encryption project that links to the company's healthcare offerings. It is a topic he is more than familiar with from his work in the healthcare sector.

"That project will be an immediate hit on my RHIA background," he says.

One of his first projects at Walmart involved implementing software for the company's international pharmacies. This project called upon Langley's blended health IT and project management skills, as well as a recent project he managed that automated a process for submitting information to the federal Drug Enforcement Agency.

"The DEA [project] was a compliance project, which is very much about RHIA," Langley says.

While his healthcare experience did play a part in landing his job, Langley says an equal reason for his hiring was his project management skills and ability to grow in retail's "very wild, fast-changing, and ever-expanding environment."

His RHIA background is vital to his success as a project manager, he says.

"It has been extremely helpful because the two [HIM and project management] are so well integrated," he says. "I saw project management as a natural outcrop of the space the RHIA put me in, which was the hospital."

What Makes a Good Project Manager?

Successful project managers tend to be very organized, quick and strategic thinkers, innovative, and especially patient and passionate-everything also required of HIM professionals, Langley says. "PMs are both cheerleaders and cat herders," he says.

As the cheerleader, a project manager helps stand up fallen projects, move forward the many related pieces of a project, and get others motivated and focused on completing the project.

As a cat herder, a project manager ensures responsible entities get their work done, holds them accountable if they don't, mediates any disputes, ensures resources are justly distributed throughout the project, and helps with troubled tasks until they are completed.

Diplomacy and the ability to cooperatively work with different kinds of people to accomplish a goal is another project manager must, Miller says.

"A little give and take and understanding [is important], and being able to help people come to a conclusion to make things happen," she says.

There are many opportunities for HIM professionals turned project managers. Obtaining the PMP or other project management credential is becoming a requirement in the marketplace, Langley notes. It would be a "disservice" to a person's career to avoid becoming credentialed, in either HIM or PMP, he says. More companies are beginning to "projectize," meaning they are putting goals and specific functions into formal projects and hiring people devoted to finishing the project.

The HIM Skills in Project Management

HIM and project management employ some of the same principles and skills. Project managers must have skills in relationship management, document management, and process acumen, all requirements of an HIM director. RHIAs know about compliance challenges, shifting regulatory demands, and how to implement good workflow management-all skills used in project management.

"In the HIM director role, there was a lot of relationship building that happens when you are working with physicians, administration, working with various clinical areas," Miller says. "All that relationship building that you put into place when you are working in HIM helps build a good foundation for working in project management."

Those who convert from HIM to project manager may need thick skin, since they will likely be out of their comfort zones. The ability to manage multiple, concurrent tasks is a must in HIM and project management, as is the ability to pay attention to detail and successfully conduct risk management.

As a project manager "you are measuring things, and that is something you are doing in HIM a lot," Ledbetter says. "Whether you are looking at how many loose filings you have, how many docs are on suspension that week, there is a lot of measurement involved in HIM that carries over into project management as well."

Making the Conversion

In these changing times, there are many healthcare projects looking for leaders.

"This is a good combination of skills for future folks that are looking for ways to enhance their career," Ledbetter says. "These skills help you handle any major change that is going to be coming to your facility, be it a change in the law, whether you are expanding or downsizing your department."

If interested, get the project management training, find a project related to your skill set, and apply, Langley says.

Learn what new system upgrades are taking place in the coming years at your facility and volunteer to work on the project. Build relationships with those involved, get on the e-mail chain, and learn what you can about managing the project.

Project management makes HIM professionals more adaptable to other duties in the organization, Miller says.

With some experience on the resume, RHIA-PMP credential holders can find other opportunities outside of clinical care.

"Hospitals have a lot to offer, but there is a whole other world of people out there interacting and dealing with healthcare as stakeholders, both directly and indirectly," Langley says. "I needed to be in the stream of that, and that is why I made this change."

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