Recruitment, Selection, and Orientation for CDI Professionals

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Editor's Note: This Practice Brief supersedes the July 2013 Practice Brief titled "Recruitment, Selection, and Orientation for CDI Specialists."

The goal of a strong clinical documentation improvement (CDI) program is to validate that the documentation supports the highest level of specificity based on the clinical evidence provided. An effective CDI program begins with proper recruitment, careful selection, and adequate orientation of CDI professionals, whose purpose is to initiate concurrent and/or retrospective reviews of the health record for clear, consistent, complete, precise, reliable, legible, and timely documentation. CDI reviews can occur in both inpatient and outpatient settings and should include the level of documentation necessary to accurately assign the appropriate International Classification of Diseases, tenth edition, Clinical Modification and Procedural Coding System (ICD-10-CM/PCS) and Current Procedural Terminology (CPT) codes.

These efforts result in greater integrity of the documentation, which supports appropriate reimbursement and accurate quality scores. Defining the goals of the CDI program, as well as the purpose of the CDI professional's role within the organization, will assist providers in developing a process that results in the consistent hiring of quality staff.

Individuals qualified to serve as a CDI professional include, but are not limited to:

- Health information management (HIM) professionals
- Coding professionals
- Physicians
- Nurses
- Other professionals with a clinical and/or coding background

In this diverse population of possible candidates, having an appropriate knowledge base is one piece of the overall process and does not guarantee success. This Practice Brief will provide guidelines for the ideal successful recruitment, selection, and orientation processes for CDI professionals in the development of a sustainable and high-quality CDI program.

Recruitment Best Practices

Researchers agree that the best way to recruit top talent is to create a culture that promotes a positive work environment,[1] which leads to greater job satisfaction and employee retention.[2] Creating a culture in which staff members are treated with respect and consideration while compensated with a competitive salary and benefits package will help your organization stand out as a place where people want to work.[3] A positive setting, salaries, and benefits are significant components of a job search for new hires so it's important to create a workplace where top talent would want to work.[4]

Managers can seek opportunities to involve CDI professionals in committees and/or meetings that promote CDI activities and physician education. Another opportunity would be to leverage CDI professionals as contributing writers for the CDI newsletter. Newsletters can be created specifically for CDI topics and dispersed throughout the organization. This helps promote the benefits of having a CDI program and identify the current documentation

topics impacting the organization.[5] Developing increasingly influential roles for existing staff may assist in recruiting for the organization as current staff communicate the value of their own roles within the organization and demonstrate the rewarding nature of the program. Opportunities to learn and grow professionally will cascade from current employees to peers who may be seeking to make a job change. These individuals can also add value to the interview process, allowing them to more easily identify applicants who fit the team and who will enhance the selection process.

Finding the right individuals does not end with acknowledging experience. Successful CDI programs also consider cultural compatibility, leadership skills, effective communication, and intellectual ability to excel in a complex healthcare environment. The recruitment process can take several months and should not be rushed or neglected.

Recruitment often goes beyond traditional candidate searches, job hiring sites, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Furthermore, many organizations lack the infrastructure and processes for recruiting CDI professionals because of a focus on internal talent development. Internal talent development is always a preferred method for growth and development, but it is not the only recruitment option available.

Recruiting Internally

There are advantages to recruiting internally—hiring from within the organization. These candidates are already ingrained in the organizational culture and are knowledgeable of the organizational goals and needs as well as the focus of the CDI program. Internal candidates often approach the new positions with positive outlooks and knowledge of how they can make a difference.

When recruiting internally for CDI positions, there are many potential candidate streams. Internal candidates can be located within the HIM, coding, quality, nursing, or case management departments. These candidates often require an additional skill or knowledge development if the CDI position is outside their current scope. For example, if a unit coordinator has completed their associate-level degree, is credentialed as a registered health information technician (RHIT), and demonstrates the skills to advance into a CDI position, they still may need additional training on the specifics of CDI.

There are also potential disadvantages to recruiting internal candidates, including the promotion of organizational cultural complacency, restricting the candidate pool, perpetuating poor performers, and constraining creative ideas.

Recruiting Externally

Many organizations utilize external recruitment as a balance to internal recruitment activities. Recruiting external candidates facilitates new ideas and brings fresh candidates into the organization. It allows the organization to choose from a larger pool of applicants. It also can lead to a more experienced and diverse workforce, and can decrease training costs because the candidate comes into the organization with the skills and knowledge required for the job with little or no development needed.

For example, if an external candidate holding the registered health information administrator (RHIA), certified coding specialist (CCS), and certified documentation improvement practitioner (CDIP) credentials applies for a position in the CDI department, they will come into the organization with specific, required knowledge. For example, a candidate who is a registered nurse (RN) may already hold a CCS credential and have case management experience.

Organizations should also consider the disadvantages of hiring externally, as it is much more of an unknown for the organization. Even with a solid recruitment effort, selection pool, and orientation process, new candidates are

still relatively unknown. It can be difficult to identify how they will fit with other staff members and react in certain situations. External candidates—for example, an experienced CDI professional—may find it difficult to adapt to a new process. Adding in questions during the recruitment phase regarding their comfort level with changes can help identify those individuals who may struggle with the program's structure. Candidate misplacements can cost the organization time and financial resources.

Recruitment Tips

Employees are the lifeblood of an organization but finding the right candidate can often be overwhelming. Suggestions to expand the pool of candidates include:

- Recruiting both internally and externally
- Starting an internship program with local universities

    - Internships can be beneficial in promoted CDI efforts; many students are not aware of CDI as a specialty area.
    - Each CDI program will need to determine if they are willing to hire new graduates. New graduates may lack the experience needed to be successful in CDI, but students are typically ready to learn something new, which could make up for the lack of experience.

- Advertising in professional journals or magazines
- Posting openings at trade association meetings
- Asking current employees to assist in recruitment efforts
- Looking for key behaviors and plan on developing skills
- Utilizing job shadowing for internal candidates
- Rotating nursing and HIM students through the CDI program

Selecting the Right Employee

Prior to selecting employees for new positions, the organization must decide if it is open to recruiting entry-level professionals without CDI experience or if it prefers professionals with little-to-extensive CDI experience. It is also essential to define the format of the program—for example, in-house/onsite reviews vs. offsite/remote reviews. There has been an upward trend in hybrid programs which are attractive to many candidates and allow for flexibility, increase employee satisfaction, and increase productivity. Defining these parameters helps filter the candidate pool and streamlines the hiring process.

CDI is quickly expanding beyond the adult inpatient scope to include outpatient, psychiatry, pediatrics, rehab, and same-day surgeries/ambulatory care. This expansion is leading to the need for specialized reviews and a mix of CDI staff who can cater to this growing need.

Recruiters often run into issues like information falsification on resumes. When this occurs, the candidate may appear qualified on paper but in reality, isn't able to offer the expertise required to be successful in the CDI role. Recruiting and selecting the right fit for any CDI program requires a careful and thoughtful analysis of each prospective candidate to ensure the candidate can perform at the level required for the position.

Generally, to be successful in a CDI role, candidates must have the clinical knowledge required to review a health record, the ability to recognize deficiencies or gaps in documentation, and strong critical/analytical thinking skills. Effective communication skills are of the utmost importance as well, because the person in this role needs to be able to confidently converse with providers and other team members. A candidate that possesses these qualities would be ideal for a CDI program.

Optimal candidate selection has the potential to decrease employee turnover. Ultimately, a strong CDI professional can provide a positive influence on the organization's culture and program effectiveness. In addition, successful selection will save the organization time and money during the orientation and training process.

Throughout the process of hiring a new employee, remember to carefully assess the applicant's fit with both the team and physicians. Utilizing experience and intellectual capabilities alone will not guarantee an appropriate hire. The ability to seamlessly interact with the team and communicate effectively with physicians is a strong indication of how well the CDI professional will integrate into the organization. To that end, it is important to ensure that final hiring decisions remain under the hiring manager's authority.

Candidates that are a good organizational fit may be extremely difficult to find so staying flexible is important when making hiring decisions. Still, creating the right culture, maximizing the best workers, and staying involved during the hiring process may not fill every open position. In some instances, the right choice may not be the person with long-term experience, but the person that fits best with the team and culture of the organization. This may mean hiring someone with less experience and committing to providing the necessary training and education to develop the skill set.

Preliminary Selection

Selection begins with a preliminary application review and screening interview, which is usually conducted over the phone. This process eliminates candidates who do not meet the minimum eligibility criteria established by the organization. This process should include a thorough review of the candidate's application or resume, skill set, academic background, certifications, and work history.

Depending on the goals of the CDI program—whether looking to hire trainees or experienced professionals—evaluation of a potential candidate may include identifying healthcare experience, prior experience in coding or other related work, and possession of the CDIP/CCDS credential. Establishing these criteria will help narrow down the pool of candidates.

The next step in the selection process may include specific questions that further narrow down the pool of candidates. This may be completed by either human resources staff or the hiring manager. These questions may focus on items such as:

- Gaps in the application: "Can you tell me why the education section is blank?"
- Additional qualifications: "Do you have any additional certifications or qualifications you would like me to know about?"
- Questions about experience: "Your application indicates two years of healthcare experience; can you explain other experience that may be relevant?"
- Adaptability: "How comfortable are you with change? Can you give me an example of a time when you had to learn a new process and how well you adapted to this change?"

Interview

Interviews are conducted after candidates have been chosen through the preliminary selection process. Interviews can take place on site or via Skype or other video conference options for candidates who cannot come to the physical location, allowing for flexibility to encourage prospective hires. The interview format can be a one-on-one discussion with the hiring manager, a team interview, or a combination of the two. The interview process should be defined in a procedure indicating who will be included and which standard questions will be asked. While the interview format and potential questions should provide a foundation to gain information from each candidate, the format should also be flexible, allowing members of the interview team to introduce new questions based on

the interviewee's responses. To create a flexible interview atmosphere that is most conducive to candidates, it is important to include key stakeholders in the interview process, including:

- Hiring manager
- CDI director/manager
- Members of the CDI team
- Coding professionals
- Nursing specialists
- Physician advisor

The interview process can be intimidating for candidates so it is important to make an effort to reduce their anxiety. Allow space for the candidate to talk about their personal experiences, which can help the hiring manager gauge the candidate in an informal manner. It can also help the interviewer generate questions based on the information offered by the candidate.

It is very important for interviewers to avoid distractions like checking notes to read questions. This approach takes the spontaneity out of the interview and may create a restrictive atmosphere that doesn't allow candidates to better express themselves.

Questions can be asked about candidates' previous CDI experience, with the potential to identify and articulate connections between their experience and the processes in place at the interviewer's organization.

Testing the Candidates

A potential additional step in the selection process may be a written test. The test can focus on aptitude, intelligence, reasoning, or personality and should be used to objectively assess the potential candidate. The test should not be biased. Questions should be open ended, requiring a thoughtful response by the candidate rather than a simple yes or no answer. These tests are usually given by the hiring manager and can be weighted for importance.

Sample questions include:

- Why do you feel that CDI is important to the organization's revenue cycle and quality reporting?
- Explain what principal and secondary diagnoses are.
- Can you provide an example of a time you encountered a negative situation and explain what you did to diffuse the situation?
- When working on a team, what role do you usually take and why?
- What is an example of how you have communicated a difficult decision?

CDI-based multiple-choice tests can also be given to assess the CDI knowledge of the candidate. To review some sample pre- and post-hire CDI assessment questions, see the AHIMA CDI Toolkit available at http://bok.ahima.org/doc?oid=301829.

Plan an Organizational Orientation

Organizational Orientation

To ensure success and sustainability, a successful CDI program requires structure. Organizations should address staffing and management of the CDI program within the current human resource dynamics of the organization. A comprehensive department-specific training program with clear objectives should be incorporated into an overall

training program for the CDI professional. In addition to organizational training, the CDI professional should have a plan for training specifically geared toward educating the CDI professional.

CDI Program Orientation

It is important for organizations to ensure CDI staff are "thoroughly trained in the principles of high-quality clinical documentation as well as the review of patient records to identify possible deficiencies in documentation."[6] A collaborative training session where nurses, doctors, allied health professionals, and seasoned CDI professionals are present is highly recommended in order to give the new CDI professional a well-rounded view of the program.

Training for CDI staff should include three parts:[7]

- Training in the theory of high-quality clinical documentation
- Training in the physician query process
- Training on how to collect and analyze data for the program

Training in the theory of high-quality clinical documentation

Training in the theory of high-quality clinical documentation should include the fundamentals of coding and reimbursement, and should cover how high-quality clinical documentation affects the reimbursement process. CDI staff should be knowledgeable of current coding guidelines in order to determine if documentation provided in the health record is sufficient to appropriately identify the severity of illness and risk of mortality of the patient being treated. The CDI professional should also be trained on the basics of quality indicators and how inadequate documentation can affect the organization's quality scores.

Diagnosis Related Group (DRG) Training

An important aspect of CDI training and education is understanding the impact of severity diagnoses and its relation to Diagnosis Related Groups. Some organizations provide a specific list of diagnoses to be queried by the CDI professional as ongoing initiatives. This list is usually comprised of commonly occurring severity diagnoses— comorbid conditions or major comorbid conditions—while other organizations educate their associates on query opportunities per major diagnostic categories. The final group of CDI programs educate CDI professionals on DRGs and coding concepts. For further guidance on educating CDI professionals on understanding DRGs and coding guidelines and practices, please refer to Appendix A: Key Points in Developing a CDI Program.

Training in the Physician Query Process

Training in the physician query process is a critical component of the clinical documentation improvement process. CDI professionals should be trained on appropriate ways to review a health record to identify documentation deficiencies, when a physician query may be needed, and the parameters for constructing a compliant query. According to Hess, "The record review process should include addressing all components of the patient record as possible sources for query opportunities."[8]

In general, physician queries should be constructed to clarify conflicting, ambiguous, or incomplete information, obtain clinically relevant information not previously addressed within the current documentation, and clarify present-on-admission indicator assignments.[9]

For more information on constructing a compliant query, reference AHIMA's 2019 Practice Brief titled "Guidelines for Achieving a Compliant Query Practice" and the AHIMA Inpatient Query Toolkit. Both are available online in AHIMA's HIM Body of Knowledge.

Training On Data Collection and Analysis

CDI professionals should be trained on how to collect data, how to analyze the data collected, how to enter information into the program database, and how to formulate and organize the data for a physician query.

The collection of program data should include the identification of:[10]

- All cases reviewed
- The number of cases with queries
- The nature of the query
- The physician's response to the query

Post-Training Evaluation

After initial training of CDI staff, a post-training evaluation should be conducted to ensure the appropriate transfer of knowledge has occurred and the CDI professional has a strong grasp on key concepts. Post-training evaluation can also include a "shadowing" program in which more experienced CDI professionals within the organization shadow newer staff in order to ensure an effective training process.

Ongoing Education for CDI staff

Ongoing education for CDI staff is crucial to the ultimate success of the CDI program. Ongoing education can include additional coursework to obtain credentials such as the Certified Documentation Improvement Practitioner (CDIP). Ongoing training can also include choosing specific cases for review within the CDI group as a learning opportunity to help all staff continue to develop skills.

Current and Future Trends in CDI

Healthcare Settings

CDI has been under steady growth for the past 30 years. What began in the inpatient setting to ensure documentation captured the comprehensive care of physicians and the utilized resources has expanded into the entire continuum of care. CDI now occurs from all points of entry, including outpatient settings such as emergency departments, surgery centers, clinics, and even physician offices. The importance of documentation has hit an even higher standard as patients need their vital information made available to all who provide their care regardless of the point of entry. When a patient cannot speak for him or herself, their health record becomes their source of truth. The more comprehensive and accurate the record, the safer the transition of care from one setting or facility to another.

Professional Backgrounds

CDI requires collaboration among various healthcare professionals. Regardless of the CDI professional's background, the need for complete and accurate documentation remains at the forefront. For a CDI program to be effective, a partnership of a clinical professional with an HIM professional is the ideal marriage. This collaboration allows for the successful capture of documentation to reflect the severity and complexity of patients' illnesses. HIM professionals have knowledge of coding rules, guidelines, and key terminology necessary in order to ensure that the documentation accurately reflects a patient's medical condition or comorbidities. When a CDI professional has a clinical background, they understand the complexities that are happening during a patient's course of medical care.

Location of Reviews

The set-up for CDI programs varies. There are currently three types of programs that organizations typically employ: onsite, remote, and hybrid. The onsite program has the CDI team working on the nursing units or clinic sites to support interacting with physicians concurrently to clarify any documentation deficiencies. The remote program, in which the CDI professionals work from another facility or home base, provides an uninterrupted work flow that enhances overall work productivity. However, a specific limitation of the fully remote program is that there is no face-to-face interaction between the CDI professional and physician. This limitation is particularly evident when documentation queries require verbal clarification, especially during those instances when the physician has a question or requires education on why the documentation needs further elaboration. The hybrid program is a combination of both onsite and remote activities. The hybrid design often will have the CDI team working a certain number of days on-site and other days remotely.

Appendices

- [Appendix A: Key Points in Developing a CDI Program](#)
- [Appendix B: Orientation for New CDI Professionals](#)
- [Appendix C: Ongoing Education Plan](#)
- [Appendix D: Qualitative Productivity Tool Example](#)

Notes

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