

Relieving the Shortage of Coding Professionals

Save to myBoK

by Mary Uppena, RHIA, CPHQ

As coding professionals move into management, other HIM-related professions, or retire, coding supervisors are left with staffing shortages that impede productivity. Record numbers of experienced coding professionals are and will be needed, and recruitment efforts to find this new staff can be challenging.

Hit Where It Hurts

The coder shortage can immediately affect the accounts receivable (AR) days of a healthcare facility. With today's regulations, in many instances, if the bill is not sent out within 60 days of the date of service, it will not be paid. Another problem is the use of old codes or incorrect demographic information, which may lead to increased delays for "unclean claims." Further, APCs will create increased demands for coding expertise.

Long-term effects of a professional coding staff shortage can be found in the chargemaster, quality management studies, medical staff credentialing statistics, and the financial bottom line of the facility. A lack of reliable coded data can influence every department that relies on a correct database for statistical information.

Fraud and abuse concerns require the specific expertise of coding professionals for the compliance component of an ongoing training program. Other issues include increased PRO reviews and insurance company audits. Upcoming HIPAA regulation implementation also will require coding expertise.

Recruiting the Best

Despite ads in health information publications, newspapers, on television and college job boards, the coder shortage persists. Health information and coding courses always have room for more enrollees while educators are hard to find. To alleviate backlogs in the short term, we can hire temps from a coding agency. Other options include Internet coding sites and natural language processing coding.

To truly reduce the shortage, coding supervisors must take an active role, not only in recruiting, but in maintaining and expanding the skills of their coding professionals. To recruit students, consider serving as a member of local college advisory committees or a guest lecturer or hosting students for internships or part-time jobs. These students often make excellent new employees. The AHIMA Web site lists HIM programs in each state, which are good places to look for sources of new staff. High school guidance counselors also need to be made aware of the coding profession and local education programs.

Next, develop a network of contacts among the coding professionals in your area to recruit experienced coding professionals by attending local workshops and conferences. Then, take a look at your open coding positions to:

- perform a facility assessment to determine the availability of local coding experts and the facility's salary scale and benefits
- compare your assessment to the region's current offerings to develop a more realistic sense of what is needed to make your position and facility attractive to coding professionals
- consider broadening recruitment activities to cover a larger geographic area
- consider adjusting the salary scale to recruit the needed expertise from outside of the local area, plus including relocation costs. In short, facility budgets may need to be stretched

Retain and Reward

Look for ways to retain your expert coders while maintaining their skills. While every coder's definition of job satisfaction will differ, consider offering benefits in the form of educational opportunities, flexible hours, or other perks. Explore opportunities for workshops and seminars to maintain current coders' expertise. These may be sponsored by local colleges, state HIM associations, insurance companies, or consulting firms. Another avenue to consider is Internet-based training. These courses are offered through a college or by a healthcare corporation or association and allow the student to work and take classes on their schedule and at their own pace. Further, these programs can be cost-effective by saving travel expenses and days away from the job. Other benefits of using Internet-based instruction include the ability to break the materials into small units, train all levels of existing employees, and use the training as part of an ongoing compliance program.

The key to successfully hiring, training, and maintaining a staff of coding professionals in today's complex healthcare environment requires a coding supervisor to do his or her homework by exploring every available educational and recruitment opportunity. Further, supervisors need to constantly monitor the needs of their staff and their facility, as well as network with peers to keep abreast of the ever-changing coding field.

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