Research Track: Career Progressions in Research for HIM Professionals

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HIM professionals are naturals for careers in research. Here's how data management, analysis, and reporting skills can help make the transition.

HIM professionals know research is critical to the advancement and delivery of healthcare. Research is "a way to create knowledge. It answers questions and provides solutions to everyday problems. . . It is a step-by-step method that ordinary people can use to collect reliable and accurate facts in order to generate valuable information."[1]

Information from many diverse sources drives the evolution of healthcare, and the health information manager is the one professional who knows what information is available, where it is stored, how it can be retrieved, and what it means.[2] In 1999 an AHIMA task force addressed the need for research and decision support specialists in the book *Evolving HIM Careers: Seven Roles for the Future*. A statement there is as true today as it was then:

> Healthcare organizations . . . should invest in the professionals who have the skills to analyze and report the data. The need for research and decision support specialists (or analysts) is growing, and many HIM professionals are preparing themselves to take on these evolving roles in healthcare management.[3]

Today more than 2,700 AHIMA members have an interest in research methods, and more than 1,400 members indicate that data analysis and reporting is a job duty. More than 100 members are involved in formal research of some kind.[4] Clearly, health information professionals have a significant interest in research career possibilities.

While career opportunities and required skills may seem fairly obvious, there are a number of roles for the HIM professional's consideration. Down the left of the following table are listed skills, duties, educational background, and other aspects of the research field. Across the top, "ladder rungs" one to four represent the progression individuals can be expected to make as they advance in their research career. This career ladder is designed to illustrate possibilities and provide ways to contribute to the HIM profession in the field of research.

	Ladder Rung			
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Job Titles	Data entry clerk Data coordinator Data assistant Clinical research assistant Data collection associate Research analyst	Data manager Clinical compliance coordinator Clinical site monitor Clinical research associate Investigational study coordinator Research database administrator Biostatistician	Manager of data collection Regional site monitor Research manager Sponsor monitor or reviewer Epidemiologist Institutional review board (IRB) administrator	Clinical research coordinator Project manager Director or administrator Principal investigator Coprincipal investigator Sponsor investigator Protocol manager Clinical application specialist
Education and	Associate degree or bachelor's	Rung 1, plus: Bachelor's degree	Rung 2, plus: Master's degree in	Rung 3, plus: Clinical Research

Certification	degree required or preferred Certification as RHIA, RHIT, or CCS or licensed as an LPN or RN	required Master's degree in epidemiology or statistics usually preferred Certified Clinical Research Professional certification from Society of Clinical Research Professionals (SOCRA) or Clinical Research Associate certification from the Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP)	epidemiology or statistics Additional courses from SOCRA and ACRP	Coordinator certification from ACRP Additional courses in project management and clinical research Advanced degrees (e.g., PhD in epidemiology, health services administration, or biomedical informatics)
Research-Related Knowledge	Medical terminology, disease process, protocol language, medical record analysis, documentation, basic data entry, database resource management, and computer operations	Two years experience in clinical research Mathematical proficiency Monitoring and quality assurance Sponsor, investigator, IRB interrelationship Audits and data verification Research ethics Database administration	Rung 2, plus: Management knowledge: • Training • Budgeting • Staffing • Grant writing • Regulatory standards requirements Proposal writing	Rung 3, plus: Grant and budget development Program administration FDA regulations Reporting requirements Statistics Research ethics Epidemiology Biomedical informatics

Skills	Ability to analyze medical documentation and accurately abstract data elements as defined by the protocol Organizational skills: • Time management • Ability to prioritize • Attention to detail Ability to follow directions	Ability to verify data collection process and accuracy of data by comparison to documentation Ability to maintain objectivity Ability to document and analyze data needs related to grant protocols and proposals Data analysis and data mining	Ability to handle multiple projects Communication skills (written and verbal) Organization skills • Time management • Ability to prioritize • Attention to detail Data management and retention Customer service Client relations Marketing	Protocol interpretation and implementation skills Ability to teach others and lead process Ability to write and speak effectively Basic statistical analysis skills Methodological skills (developing the methods or steps to take in carrying out a research proposal)
Job Duties	Review records and apply protocol criteria Key data elements into abstract system (clinical database) Follow up on missing or incomplete data Verify entries for accuracy Consult with supervisor if questions arise Complete case report forms Collect and report financial information related to clinical trials and studies Manage use of technology (project development software)	Interview data collection associates to determine collection methods Compare collection methods to protocol Compare data to documentation Report findings Consult with investigators and data collection team Design forms Prepare required documents for IRB Monitor data collection protocols as required by sponsor or grant Manage use of technology (project development software)	If regional site monitor, travel to perform on-site verifications Establish processes Plan and implement data collection and verification Interact with project manager, director, or sponsor Obtain clarification Prepare IRB documentation Hire and train staff Complete required reports Verify protocols are followed Reconcile research study with allocated funding Negotiate funding variances with supporting data analysis Manage use of technology (project development software) Analyze and report data Resource	Develop project schedules, staffing, target dates, measurements, and accountabilities (quantity and quality) Prepare applications (funding) Present to IRB and sponsor Manage clinical research associates Ensure completion of required reports (annual, adverse reactions, protocol changes) Prepare findings Ensure compliance to FDA (informed consents) Recruit study participants Conduct trial (e.g., study design, trial phases, blinding) Manage clinical trial and research study close-out procedures to include reporting to various IRB, sponsors, and regulatory agencies, as appropriate.

			management (e.g., budget, staffing)	Manage use of technology (project development software)
Salary Ranges	$20,000–$50,000	$31,200–$80,000	$60,000–$125,000	$46,000–$150,000 and up
Where to Look	Healthcare institutions with research institutes Clinical research contract companies Pharmaceutical companies Medical institutions that maintain registries or databases (e.g., tumor and trauma registries) Government agencies: Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institute of Health, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Central Intelligence Agency Universities, colleges Large physician practices Health management consulting firms	Healthcare institutions with research institutes Clinical research contract companies Pharmaceutical companies Medical institutions that maintain registries or data bases (e.g., tumor and trauma registries) Government agencies: Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institute of Health, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Central Intelligence Agency Universities, colleges Large physician practices Health management consulting firms	Healthcare institutions with research institutes Clinical research contract companies Pharmaceutical companies Medical institutions that maintain registries or data bases (e.g., tumor and trauma registries) Government agencies: Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institute of Health, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Central Intelligence Agency Universities, colleges Large physician practices Health management consulting firms	Healthcare institutions with research institutes Clinical research contract companies Pharmaceutical companies Medical institutions that maintain registries or data bases (e.g., tumor and trauma registries) Government agencies: Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institute of Health, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Central Intelligence Agency Universities, colleges Large physician practices Health management consulting firms

Notes

1. LaTour, Kathleen M., and Shirley Eichenwald. Health Information Management: Concepts, Principles, and Practice. Chicago: AHIMA, 2002, p. 364.
2. Evolving HIM Careers: Seven Roles for the Future. Chicago: AHIMA, 1999, p. 99.
3. Ibid.
4. Member search, June 2004, AHIMA Communities of Practice.

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