

Soft Skills and the Importance of Empathy in HIM

[Save to myBoK](#)

By Valerie Watzlaf, PhD, MPH, RHIA, FAHIMA

Soft skills—empathy, communication, critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, interpersonal awareness, and more—are of vital importance in the HIM workforce. This consensus is one I have encountered over and over again, from conversations with employers to the results of AHIMA workforce studies.

I believe one of the most important soft skills for HIM professionals is empathy: the ability to understand or feel what another person is experiencing without experiencing it yourself. Basically, the ability to place yourself in another's shoes. Being empathetic enables one to work well with others regardless of social, emotional, or cultural differences. While some perceive being empathetic in the workplace as being meek, in reality it is one of the strongest leadership characteristics an individual can possess.

For example, empathy can help us understand why an individual may be having a difficult time using the electronic health record (EHR). While use of the EHR system may be second nature to you, taking a moment to jump into another person's shoes can help you understand why that same system might be difficult for them to navigate. One potential conflict could be for a physician that feels the EHR does not allow them to communicate openly with their patients—who represent their top priority. Understanding these feelings can help HIM professionals address the issue with better-tailored training.

Empathy can also help HIM professionals understand patient frustrations when they are trying to access their information via the patient portal or requesting a copy of their health record. These frustrations could be due to the stress of an upcoming medical procedure, due to a weeks-long wait without acknowledgment of their request, or due to a serious illness that limits their capacity to function on a day-to-day basis. But no matter the reason, by using empathy HIM professionals can better understand where the patient is coming from and in turn better understand how best to communicate with the patient.

It has been found that empathy improves work performance and productivity in a diverse workforce because it enables individuals to listen to each other, share experiences, and build trust, motivation, and self-esteem. Emotional intelligence (EI), the ability to identify and manage your emotions and the emotions of others, is important when developing empathy skills. Furthermore, Laura Wilcox, director of management programs at Harvard Extension School, states that EI accounts for 90 percent of what moves people up the ladder when IQ and technical skills are roughly similar.

Let's commit to developing our empathy skills, starting our practice by putting ourselves in the shoes of everyone across the spectrum of the healthcare environment. This exercise will help us become more effective in our role as HIM professionals and better develop us as strong leaders.

Valerie Watzlaf (valerie.watzlaf@ahimaboard.org) is vice chair of education and associate professor at University of Pittsburgh.

Article citation:

Watzlaf, Valerie. "Soft Skills and the Importance of Empathy in HIM." *Journal of AHIMA* 90, no. 5 (May 2019): 7.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.