

Taking Chances, Moving Forward

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by Jane E. Blumenthal, associate editor

Kathleen H. Stanfield, RRA, was so nervous when she first took on her current job as health information systems coordinator at the Austin Diagnostic Medical Center (ADMC) in Texas that she felt physically ill. "It was like closing my eyes and jumping into a fire," she says of her decision to take the job two years ago. "However, I knew I had to take the job. It was the opportunity of a lifetime."

And jump she did. Prior to her job at ADMC, Stanfield worked her way up from discharge clerk to evening supervisor in an acute care facility's medical records department. But beyond educating her employees on the importance of information security, at that time her background wasn't strongly focused on that area. In fact, she was recruited for her current job as information systems coordinator after originally applying for a position as associate director of health information management at ADMC.

Playing a Versatile Role

Since then, Stanfield's position has fanned out into a broad range of responsibilities, with a job description that "changes on a daily basis." On a macro level, her job is to maintain security throughout the medical facility's information system, which includes ADMC's transition from paper- to computer-based information management. Her efforts to uphold this security involve a number of duties, such as reviewing audit trails, acting as a consultant to the facility's IS department, chairing a medical records security task force, and providing staff and physician education on information security through in-services and one-on-one training.

Beyond that, Stanfield has a long list of ongoing projects. One that is currently keeping her busy is a cooperative effort between ADMC and the Austin Diagnostic Clinic. Since the two facilities work closely together, sending patients back and forth as necessary, they share much of their compiled patient information. This means that access between the two facilities must be monitored to ensure patient record security.

Another big challenge is "maintaining a level of constant awareness of security and confidentiality among employees." She says that teaching employees how to apply information security on a practical level is important. "There's little awareness of information security in a lot of facilities. We're really having to change the mindset of employees."

Stanfield also works to ensure data quality, a role she says comes with the territory of information security. "Data integrity is a big deal, especially since I'm working so much with automating manual information systems. You must make sure that everything works appropriately to maintain data quality." Some typical examples in which this is necessary at her facility include implementing electronic signatures and setting up remote computer access.

Facing Change Head On

Stanfield says that her role as information systems coordinator has taught her how extensive her capabilities are. Though she did not possess a technical information systems background, she says her supervisor was more interested in other qualifying skills.

"I was your traditional HIM professional," she says. "My supervisor was looking for a personality type, not specific experience." She soon learned that the position required someone who was motivated, willing to learn, had good communication skills, and could coordinate and work out solutions with other employees. Most importantly, ADMC wanted someone who would take the initiative and mold the position into an effective role within the facility.

Though she says a good understanding of patient care processes, the information flow in a facility, and federal and state regulatory laws are beneficial to someone entering the information security field, they are not necessary for admittance into this arena. "You can learn all that on the job," she says. "It's just a matter of motivation and initiative to actually learn it."

She also makes full use of her resources. Besides relying on other departments in the facility, she looks to other sources, such as mentors, the Internet, and a variety of professional journals and magazines. She also recommends AHIMA's Information Security Program in a Box.

All of these qualities have enabled Stanfield to take on the challenges posed by her job. More importantly, they help her enjoy her work. That's what taking chances is all about.

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