

Tips for Breaking into the Health Information Management Industry - Retired

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Whether it is a first job or a career change, finding that first health information management (HIM) job following graduation is one of the biggest challenges that new graduates face. While some may find that breaking into the HIM industry takes time and persistence, it is a career choice that offers stability and many avenues for personal growth.

HIM professionals work in a variety of settings with many job titles. The possibilities for new graduates in this field continue to grow each year to include operational and administrative functions in HIM departments as well as roles in the health information technology and health informatics fields.

Where to Start

In healthcare, networking is a crucial element of any job search. It is probably the number one most powerful tool to land that first job, since many available jobs will not be listed on job search sites or in the newspaper. New graduates, and those seeking a new position, should notify any friends and contacts in the HIM industry to be on the lookout for any available positions. Social media is also a great way to network with professionals and learn about job opportunities. Another helpful resource for job openings is a student's college career office. Students should make sure to take advantage of any free services that are available through their school while they are able, such as job fairs, job postings, resume writing workshops, and advice from instructors.

If friends and contacts do not have any leads, the Internet is the next best option. But an Internet search can be overwhelming. Instead of looking at individual job listings, try using a job search query on a career site that will capture job postings across many sites, thus narrowing the search. Most online career sites allow users to create an account and save their search preferences, requiring little effort for subsequent searches. Some sites will send an e-mail notification when a job is posted that matches the applicant's search criteria. With all of the different websites available, the application process can be overwhelming, so develop a system for organizing and tracking the jobs you have applied for. Do not forget to include the date of application, relevant contact name and number, when to follow up, and the dates and times of any interviews in your tracking system.

There are several free programs online that can help with organizing the job search process. Examples include Startwire.com, Applymate.com, Myindeed.com, and JibberJobber.com. These online tools can help track contacts as well as log all aspects of the hiring process, and some have features that allow the user to add notes to job listings and manage job alerts. By streamlining the job search process, jobseekers are less likely to miss any important dates or opportunities because they have maximized the results of their efforts.

Mentors are valuable to individuals who are transitioning into the HIM arena. Bonding with a mentor facilitates the sharing of skills and knowledge, which is beneficial to enhance professional growth and development. Mentors provide support, which enhances a mentee's confidence in pursuing a job. A relationship with a mentor can lead to opportunity and, in some cases, employment.

HIM programs have a variety of disciplines, such as medicine, information technology, finance, law, and management, and there are thus multiple work settings from which HIM program graduates can choose when pursuing a career path. AHIMA's HIM Career Map, available online at <http://hicareers.com/CareerMap>, shows the path from entry-level through master's degree-level positions in compliance/risk management, education/communication, informatics/data analytics, IT/infrastructure, medical records operation/administration, and revenue cycle management, which includes coding and billing. Another resource available to students and jobseekers is the Career Prep webinar series, which is located in the Career Prep Tools section of AHIMA's website, www.ahima.org. The series includes free recordings that cover valuable topics relevant for seeking and securing a position in HIM.

After Education, Get the Certification

AHIMA offers certification opportunities, relevant for every level of education, that provide upward mobility and financial rewards in the HIM career field. It is true that AHIMA credentials are the “gold standard” when employers seek candidates for their organization because they represent individuals who have passed rigorous testing and maintain continuing professional development standards. The following are a few of the credentials AHIMA offers.

Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA)

Registered health information administrator (RHIA) applicants must successfully complete an accredited HIM program at the baccalaureate level. Accredited programs can be found at www.cahiim.org. AHIMA is the only RHIA certification body for HIM professionals; no other organizations offer a similar credential. Patient information is a strategic asset for healthcare organizations, bringing professionals with the RHIA credential into high demand. RHIAs work in a variety of settings including hospitals, mental health facilities, and ambulatory settings, as well as managed care organizations, government facilities, and pharmaceutical companies. The RHIA credential demonstrates skills in diverse areas, such as:

- Designing processes and administering computer information systems to produce accurate and complete health records
- Improving the quality of data
- Confirming accurate coding for reimbursement
- Ensuring compliance with the standards and regulations of accrediting bodies and state and federal laws

RHIAs analyze data for quality improvement, clinical trials, disease management, and utilization management. Managing people and divisions and participating in organizational committees are also part of the RHIA domain.

Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT)

Registered health information technician (RHIT) candidates must have earned an associate’s degree in an accredited health information technology program to be eligible to sit for the exam. The demand for RHITs is increasing due to advances in technology and the widespread use of electronic health records. RHITs are found in hospitals, office-based physician practices, nursing homes, home health agencies, legal and insurance firms, and health product vendors. RHITs ensure the quality of health records and healthcare data by validating completeness, accuracy, and timeliness. They use computer applications to analyze patient data. Some RHITs focus on coding diagnoses and procedures in patient records for reimbursement and research. RHITs with experience are frequently promoted to supervisory-level positions.

Combined with a bachelor’s degree, higher level management positions are within reach for professionals with the RHIT credential. A specialized role for the RHIT is cancer registrar, responsible for collecting and maintaining data on cancer patients. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics states the employment of RHITs is expected to grow by 21 percent between 2010 and 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics website.

Certified Coding Specialist (CCS) and Certified Coding Specialist Physician-Based (CCS-P)

The certified coding specialist (CCS) and certified coding specialist physician-based (CCS-P) certifications both indicate a mastery level of skill in coding. The CCS credential indicates coding skill in the inpatient arena, while the CCS-P credential applies to outpatient and ambulatory settings. Candidates qualify for the exam in a few different ways:

- By Credential—with the RHIA, RHIT, CCS, or CCS-P credential
- By Education—with completion of a coding training program that includes anatomy and physiology, pathophysiology, pharmacology, medical terminology, reimbursement methodology, and intermediate/advanced ICD diagnostic/procedural and CPT coding
- By Experience—with a minimum of two years of related coding experience directly applying codes
- By Credential with Experience—with a CCA credential plus one year of coding experience directly applying codes
- Other Coding Credential—with a credential from another certifying organization plus two years inpatient coding experience directly applying codes

Knowledgeable and experienced CCS/CCS-P-certified coders are at a premium, enjoy higher salaries, and benefit from the opportunity to work in hospitals, health systems, government agencies, insurance firms, pharmaceutical companies, or remotely from home.

Certifications at Work in the Industry

The combination of CCS and RHIT certifications is the way to move up to healthcare organization supervisory positions in the coding arena. The RHIT certification alone does not bridge the gap into an inpatient coding position because it prepares students for management rather than the specialty of coding.

Inpatient coding requires proficient analytical skills in order to read medical records (in electronic or paper form) and extract information about the patient's diagnoses and procedures. Inpatient coders use ICD-9-CM diagnosis and procedure codes to capture and report patient encounters for reimbursement purposes, or for use in research, organizational strategic planning, clinical trials, national registries, and in the creation of government policy. Accuracy and quality of coded data is of great importance because codes are utilized in so many ways.

Experts agree that individuals desiring to break into the field of coding should seek internships and volunteer opportunities to demonstrate dedication and interest in the field. Additionally, showing a willingness to begin with a lower position can be the start of better opportunities within a short period of time. Experience plays a major role in promotion in the coding field, coupled with education and certification.

The CCS-P certification is designed for coding professionals employed in physician offices, hospital specialty clinics, group practices, or remotely from home. Candidates qualify for the exam with the same requirements as the CCS (noted above).

CCS-P professionals analyze medical records for diagnoses and procedures in the outpatient arena utilizing ICD-9-CM diagnosis codes, and HCPCS Level I and Level II coding systems. Outpatient coders are a valuable asset for health providers because coded patient data is submitted for reimbursement to private and governmental entities, and they possess expert knowledge in health information documentation and data quality.

AHIMA certification opens the door to job opportunities and new avenues for advancement by showing an individual's drive to perform at the highest level possible in HIM. Certification commands a higher salary for those willing to take on the challenges of the examination, continuing education, and development. Professionals will find greater success in their careers by choosing to become a part of an organization dedicated to life-long achievement.

Gaining Experience through Volunteerism

Volunteering is providing time and service with no monetary compensation. Not only does an organization benefit from a volunteer's time commitment and abilities, the volunteer also benefits from the experience. Volunteering enables the building of skills, experience, and knowledge that can be used to enhance a resume. It is also helpful in building up a network of professional contacts.

Volunteering shows future employers that an individual is committed to the community and has a passion for the HIM field. Volunteer experience can be viewed by potential employers as having equal weight to true work experience and is particularly useful to students, new graduates, and those transitioning into the HIM arena with little or no work experience. Volunteers can learn new skills, gain knowledge, complete a project, take on new responsibilities, and learn more about the industry and the organization that they would like to work for. This experience can be empowering and build confidence in one's abilities to deal with the day-to-day demands of the field. Just like working, the volunteer experience builds long-lasting bonds and can ultimately lead to getting an interview for the actual job.

There are a variety of places to volunteer. These places include physician offices, hospitals, and professional organizations. Such places can provide an opportunity to increase professional contacts and sharpen professional skills. In seeking out a place to volunteer, one should volunteer where they want to work. In addition to building a helpful professional network, the volunteer experience is a good opportunity to research whether one would actually want to work in an organization long term. Volunteering opens up greater possibilities for learning opportunities such as informational interviews that will help to build a network of professional contacts.

It is important to keep in mind that volunteering is more than just helping out. Any tasks completed while volunteering where the volunteer demonstrates applicable skills are in fact valuable and should be viewed with the same weight as a full-time job. Volunteers should be proud of what they learn and do for an organization and incorporate their volunteer experiences, skills, and knowledge into their resume. Volunteering is truly beneficial in developing a career. Individuals should perform in a volunteer role as if they are a paid employee. This includes being on time, being professional, and performing all assignments to the best of their ability.

Transitioning from Non-HIM Roles

Transitioning from a non-HIM role takes time and commitment. It all starts with understanding the field and learning about the necessary requirements to get into the HIM profession. Job shadowing is a great way to explore the field. This opportunity allows one to see what a HIM professional does on a day-to-day basis and provides direct access to the professionals for any questions. In transitioning to the HIM arena, self-evaluation is important for determining any applicable areas that need improvement prior to pursuing viable HIM career opportunities. Valuable information on accredited schools and certification requirements is offered through the AHIMA website.

Skills that have been gained in a non-HIM field should be neither ignored nor downplayed. If one has skills that are beneficial in obtaining a job in the HIM arena, highlight them either in the resume, cover letter, interview, or in a 30-second elevator speech. It is important to emphasize one's motivation and willingness to expand knowledge and skills in the HIM profession while networking.

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The above is an abridged version of this Practice Brief. The full version, including tips on creating resumes, marketing to employers, and the application and interview process, is available online in AHIMA's HIM Body of Knowledge.

