

Transcription's Future(s): AAMT and AHIMA Outline Scenarios for the Years Ahead

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Identifying the factors that will shape transcription in the coming years helps create strategies to anticipate and influence the possible outcomes.

What does the future hold for transcription? Will there be rapid adoption of technology within a standards and quality framework that supports the electronic health record (EHR) and the information needs of all stakeholders? Or will technology advances flounder while demand for increased information and quality data pressure the system? These are just two future scenarios considered by the Transcription Futures Group convened by the American Association of Medical Transcription (AAMT) and AHIMA boards of directors to consider the future of medical transcription.

Given the nationwide emphasis on EHR adoption, AAMT and AHIMA leaders felt an urgent need to consider how changes in the healthcare industry would affect current methods for documenting health information. In November 2004 the boards convened a dozen industry experts to consider the forces driving change and accordingly outline potential future scenarios.

The group used scenario planning, a technique that has been used to predict everything from the future of oil prices to the dismantling of apartheid.¹ With this method, planners do not try to define what will happen in the future and then plan for that one outcome. Instead, they describe alternative futures and then select the strategies that are most likely to result in the preferred future and reduce the risk of negative outcomes. For example, the adoption of new technologies will certainly affect transcription, but there are many uncertainties to consider. When will it happen? How fast will adoption take place? How universally will technology be adopted?

The Forces Driving Change

The group identified five forces driving change in transcription.

Development of dictation- and transcription-enabling technologies. Front- and back-end speech recognition and natural language processing are just two dictation- and transcription-enabling technologies that will affect the future of transcription, according to the group. Other advances in structured-text capture through templates and handwriting recognition could also alter traditional forms of data capture, storage, and delivery.

Evolution and convergence of health information roles. Health information roles continue to change and evolve, but there is much data to support a continued need for HIM professionals. The group agreed that managing narrative record content would continue to be important over the next 10 years, although there would be an increase in structured data. An increased focus on data quality along with the other work force drivers outlined here may create a need for new techno-savvy data capture specialists and a decrease in traditional medical transcription skills.

Regulatory changes that influence practice. Regulatory changes have traditionally affected the volume of transcription and increased the need for rapid turnaround time and high-quality data. This trend will continue in the future with a variety of potential regulations in areas like privacy and security, outsourcing, tort reform, and changes in reimbursement.

Emerging health information needs for consumers and providers. Information demands propel the volume of transcription required in healthcare, and the group foresees new demands such as increased mobility and an electronic culture for the future. Creating information that allows patients to be active participants while providing cost-efficient care are a few of the information changes that may change the face of transcription.

Increasing demands for the information economy with the electronic health environment. The availability of information itself creates a demand. The concept of an information economy where increased information creates a demand for more information to improve decision making and minimize risk creates a vortex of increased supply and demand.

Few disagree that these drivers will affect the future of transcription. The challenge is identifying the factors that will have the greatest impact and the uncertainties that will have the greatest potential for variation.

Four Scenarios for the Future

Discussion of these uncertainties led the group to four likely future scenarios.

Scenario 1. The first scenario anticipates the rapid adoption of technology within a standards-based healthcare information system and an industry emphasis on quality that supports the EHR and information needs of all stakeholders. This scenario assumes rapid deployment and adoption of EHRs that use both speech and structured-text data capture. These new dictation- and transcription-enabling technologies are well integrated with the clinical workflow and have made individual and organizational providers much more efficient. All stakeholders use the increased and improved data to advance their decision making, including consumers who have embraced a larger role in their own healthcare.

In this scenario, health information professionals at all levels had their eye on this bullet and correctly anticipated its trajectory. They embraced and enabled these changes and gained new skills and recognition throughout the industry. Rather than reacting to or resisting this change, they focused on standards creation and research and development of best practices in data quality and collection processes. Medical transcriptionists trained for new roles as the final arbitrators of EHR data quality and completeness.

Scenario 2. The second scenario does not anticipate outcomes as positive as the first. In this view of the future, technology is just as rapidly deployed and adopted, but the information needs of all stakeholders are not sufficiently addressed and a data quality framework is lacking. The results are uneven, with some providers ahead of the curve and others woefully behind. Providers have little ability to transfer data in a useful way. Because some organizations and professions were unable or unwilling to change, the work force has become divided, with a new kind of worker receiving the emerging technology-based jobs and traditionalists who did not embrace the technology stuck in dead-end careers.

Scenario 3. This is a future with a powerful demand for increased and improved quality data, but one that is not supported by technology. Demands for consumer-centric, information-rich quality healthcare have grown out of payment incentives, disease management, and competitive physician compensation plans. To accommodate this demand for data, standards work has advanced; however, without pervasive new technologies, the industry has turned to other cost efficiencies for data capture.

Traditional transcription jobs have largely been off-shored, and new job opportunities are created in data quality management. For those professionals who have increased their skills at defining data quality requirements, developing data tracking, and monitoring systems and improving processes, the future looks very bright.

Scenario 4. The final scenario envisions a future where inertia dominates the electronic health information world. Lack of data exchange and documentation standards cause unpredictable interoperability. Technology tools are insufficient to support improved workflow. And despite a desire for increased quality driven by the value of data, movement toward consumer-centric systems is not realized. The desire for a low-cost work force drives off-shoring, and as volume swells, the pressure on input increases. More productivity for less pay characterizes the work place.

Professionals who have seen the light have equipped themselves with new skills and recycled their education and training into a suite of techno-savvy data management skills. For those who did not see a need to change, their jobs have disappeared or become bleak.

Creating a Personal Scenario Plan

What will really happen? The future is elusive, but there are key variables behind each scenario. The first is how quickly EHRs and their enabling technologies are adopted. For the past 20 years people have predicted that EHRs are right around the

corner, but are they? The second question is how strong the pull is for decision making based on quality data. Will it be sufficient to drive the investment in standards, interoperability, and collaboration?

Regardless of which future develops, the time is right to take personal action. AAMT and AHIMA are setting a course as associations, but what should you do personally to prepare? You can begin by creating your own scenario plan:

- What possible futures lie ahead? And what actions can you take to best position yourself in light of these possible futures?
- Evaluate your technology preparedness. Are you ready to lead or embrace new data capture methods and enable others?
- Consider your organizational readiness. Whether you work for a hospital, doctor, transcription company, or yourself, how prepared is that organization to adopt and embrace new technologies?
- Assess your knowledge of data and data quality standards. How prepared are you to lead or participate in efforts at your organization to improve the quality of information?
- Calculate your influence. Just as AAMT and AHIMA form alliances to pursue change in the industry, are you positioned to make change with others within your organization?

Predicting the future is tricky business, but planning and preparing for the future is important for success. Both AAMT and AHIMA are working to create a future that will best serve the needs of consumers, the healthcare industry, and our members. What futures do you predict for transcription? Are you ready for those futures?

Optimal Positioning for the HIM Future

Little is accomplished if consideration of the future doesn't spur action today, so the Transcription Futures Group developed eight areas in which action now could best position health information and transcription professionals for whatever the future holds. These eight areas included:

- Technology
- Advocacy and alliances
- Research
- Change management
- Information and technology standards
- Workflow
- Training
- Credentialing

Action items were developed in each area and then focused into a leadership initiative with the following four key components.

Advocacy and Alliances

Regardless of which future scenario plays out, the pressure of consumable, quality information output will ultimately drive electronic health record development. Regardless of slow or fast migration to the EHR, growth will come through and cause change in the domain of medical transcription practice. As with other professions and jobs throughout history, the field of medical transcription may likely be subject to creative destruction and replaced by an emerging occupation. The profession must be proactive if it is to take ownership of the up-and-coming new occupation. To make the value case for linking technology and the critical process of data quality management in producing a consumable information product, it will be important to be a player at the highest and most visible levels. AAMT and AHIMA must increase their volunteer efforts, educate and prepare their constituents for future practice scenarios, and aggressively pursue this major area of new practice.

Research

One mark of a profession is the contribution that it makes to the body of knowledge within its domain of practice. Those who are leaders in producing consumable research for use by all stakeholders are viewed as experts and leaders within the domain. Such positioning and the access to the research data itself allow an organization to actively shape its future. To be viewed as leaders, AAMT and AHIMA must develop and implement a strategic research program that can serve itself, its members, and other stakeholders well. Creating practice models and best practices for emerging occupations positions the organizations and their members to lay ownership claim to them. Providing unbiased data for making the business case for current or new technologies and processes elevates the organizations to an enviable leadership position

Standards

Participation in standards development, like the research initiative, positions the profession as an expert in the field. An active focus on the creation of standards gives the profession a degree of control over the future and the advantage of being more informed and better aware about that future. These advantages provide opportunities for incorporation of the future in strategic and tactical plans and help the organization to flourish. Professions and organizations that react instead of creating standards and regulations will likely find themselves the victims of creative destruction. AAMT and AHIMA must forcefully pursue decision-making positions within the standards community.

Training and Retraining

No matter which future scenario plays out, the medical transcription professional, AAMT, and AHIMA must acknowledge that the medical transcription role is already changing and will continue to do so, perhaps at an accelerated pace. The redefinition of the role, like many others in the wider practice of HIM, is moving on a data quality trajectory with new types of technology supporting the documentation task. It is imperative that medical transcription professionals identify and carve out their unique contributions to this area if they are to maintain and create new value in the marketplace.

Today's intermediary position of scribe will likely be the victim of creative destruction. As the intermediary position diminishes, it grows new opportunities for consulting and training physicians and other direct healthcare providers in improving input quality and content and structure of documentation. The training initiative is closely related to the advocacy and research initiatives. A comprehensive training initiative depends on the synergistic relationship among all three initiatives.

Source: AAMT and AHIMA. "Scenarios and Solutions for the Future of Transcription." April 2005. Available online in the FORE Library: HIM Body of Knowledge at www.ahima.org.

The full report from AAMT and AHIMA, titled "Scenarios and Solutions for the Future of Transcription," is available online in the FORE Library: HIM Body of Knowledge at www.ahima.org.

Note

1. Schwartz, Peter. *The Art of the Long View*. New York: Bantam, Doubleday, Dell Publishing Group, 1991.

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