Translating HIM into a Terminology Management Career

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Every profession has its own body of knowledge. This specialized knowledge leads the profession to create a language of its own, also.

The HIM profession has a distinct language and body of knowledge. Through them HIM professionals deliver a unique service to the healthcare industry. That specialized knowledge and language can also translate into a career in the emerging field of terminology management.

The HIM Body of Knowledge

The HIM profession is dedicated to the effective management of patient information and healthcare data needed to deliver high-quality treatment and care to the public.[1] A body of knowledge is required to successfully manage healthcare data. There are many ways to obtain knowledge, including formal training (e.g., educational institution, on-the-job training), nonformal venues (e.g., membership in a group with similar interests, workshops), and informal training or self-learning.

The HIM body of knowledge extends across all healthcare settings and includes various areas of expertise. Competency depends on the individual's knowledge and experience on the subject. (See the sidebar opposite for an example of content that falls under the health data management domain.)

However, after formal education, an HIM professional's level of educational and professional development with regard to specialized knowledge will vary depending on his or her career path. AHIMA's four-level knowledge ranking system, while similar to educational domain competency levels, supports the design of career pathways. The four levels are awareness, fundamentals of knowledge, analysis/application, and advanced.

Language of Healthcare Data

Clinical data sets, data standards, data mapping, vocabularies, nomenclatures, terminologies, classification systems, ICD-10-CM, SNOMED CT, and Health Level Seven are just a few of the terms commonly used in the healthcare data language, one in which HIM professionals are proficient. But what does being fluent in a language mean?

First let's define the two terms. Merriam-Webster defines language as the vocabulary and phraseology belonging to an art or a department of knowledge. It defines fluency as the ability to use language easily and accurately.

Fluency involves four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. For example, a coding professional first starting out is able to read a medical record, though not all terms may be understood. Vocabulary gaps likely exist.

Even though those outside the HIM field would consider our language a foreign one, it is a part of a terminology familiar to others in the medical field. A terminology is a set of terms representing the system of concepts of a particular subject field.

The key to terminology management is having one agreed-upon meaning for concepts in the terminology. However, this is not as easy as it sounds. It is complicated by the context and application where the term is used. For example, coding professionals are well aware of the difficulty in translating a medical term when the context is unclear.

What Is Terminology Management?

Given the health data management domain of HIM, consider which of the following might define terminology management:

- Translation of terms into codes

- Monitoring of changes in laws, regulations, and accreditation standards
- Development, implementation, validation, and maintenance of clinical terminologies, validation files, and data models used by the EHR
- Development and maintenance of the organization's data sets, data standards, data dictionary, data repository, and data warehouse
- Coordination with IT to ensure the efficient maintenance and upgrading of terminology tools
- Support to analysts and software developers during the analysis, design, implementation, testing, validation, and ongoing operation of software applications to meet user requirements
- Performance of quality analysis to ensure accuracy, integrity, relevancy, and completeness of terminological content
- Creation, standardization, use, and maintenance of terminological resources and tools (e.g., data mapping)
- Creation, maintenance, testing, and application of use case models for clinical information
- Creation and use of terminological applications (e.g., managing and transforming terminology in relational databases)
- Collection and interpretation of data (e.g., trend analysis)

As you might expect, all of the above responsibilities are part of terminology management. In addition, there can be degrees of skill and complexity involved, resulting in job levels such as data analyst I and II. Therefore, some responsibilities would require fundamental knowledge and intermediate language proficiency, while others require advanced knowledge and superior language proficiency. Terminology management also involves working with terminology stakeholders, who include authors, subject matter experts, translators, validaters, analysts, and developers, each with specialized knowledge, vocabulary, and attitude. Consequently, it requires additional knowledge, language proficiency, and persuasive skills.

HIM Domain: Health Data Management

Health data management includes knowledge of health data structure, content, and standards knowledge. HIM professionals with competency at the baccalaureate level exhibit skilled use in:

- Structure and use of health information (individual, comparative, aggregate)
- Health information media (paper, electronic/computer-based, e-health, personal, Web-based)
- Type and content of health record (paper, electronic, computer-based, e-health, personal, Web-based)
- Data quality assessment and integrity
- Health information archival systems
- National healthcare information infrastructure
- Data collection tools (e.g., forms, computer input screens, other health record documentation tools)

They possess detailed understanding of:

- Secondary data sources (registries, indexes, and databases such as MEDPAR, NPDB, HCUP)
- Healthcare data sets (e.g., OASIS, HEDIS, DEEDS, UHDDS, UACDS, NEDSS, NMMFS)

Competency levels are defined as follows:

- Awareness—introductory recall and recognition
- Literacy—knowledge of framework and content
- Concept—comprehension, translation, extrapolation, and interpretation of meaning
- Detailed understanding—appropriate application of knowledge in a structured or controlled context
- Skilled use—application using analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in new situations

Reference

AHIMA. "HIM Baccalaureate Degree Level Knowledge Cluster Content and Competency Levels (2006 and Beyond)." Available online at www.ahima.org/academics.

Careers in Terminology Management

As HIM professionals obtain additional knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and develop a broader understanding of health data management terminology, several career pathways with different job levels emerge. AHIMA's Clinical Terminology and Classification Practice Council found career pathways are the likely evolution to terminology management and data analyst roles, rather than a defined progression.[2]

Combining AHIMA's four-level knowledge ranking system with a modification of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' four proficiency levels, the table on the following page presents examples of roles for those considering a career in terminology management. As previously stated the responsibilities within these roles may have degrees of skill and complexity. As a result, job levels such as clinical coder I and II may exist within a role.

Without question HIM professionals are ideal candidates for a career in terminology management. However, to progress along the terminology management path requires adding knowledge, increased vocabulary, and a more extensive comprehension of health data management terminology. People skills are also an essential factor when working in an electronic environment.[3] However, equipped appropriately, numerous opportunities are available to HIM professionals looking to leverage their specialized knowledge and language proficiency into a career in terminology management.

Terminology Management Roles Based on HIM Body of Knowledge and Language Proficiency			
HIM professionals with awareness knowledge and novice language proficiency levels	HIM professionals with fundamental knowledge and intermediate language proficiency levels	HIM professionals with analysis/application knowledge and advanced language proficiency levels	HIM professionals with advanced knowledge and superior language proficiency levels
• Medical coder (inpatient, ambulatory, physician practice) • Medical biller • Medical claims analyst	• Clinical coder • Compliance auditor • Terminology specialist • Clinical data collection and reporting specialist • Data integrity specialist • Documentation specialist • Quality improvement specialist • Reimbursement specialist/financial services liaison	• Clinical data analyst • Clinical documentation coordinator • Clinical mapping specialist • Clinical research/trials associate • Data sets, classification, and terminology standards manager • Educator • Health data/information resource manager • Health information system applications designer/trainer, implementation and support manager • Project manager • Quality improvement manager • Revenue cycle manager	• Applied health informatics researcher • Data analytics/data mining engineer • Data sets, classification, and terminology standards developer • Health information applications developer
Adapted in part from: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Available online at www.actfl.org.			

Notes

1. AHIMA. *Health Information Management Technology: An Applied Approach*. 2nd edition. AHIMA: Chicago, IL, 2007.
2. AHIMA Clinical Terminology and Classification Practice Council. "Paving the Information Highway: Career Pathways for Knowledge Workers Involved with Coded Data." 2007. Available [forthcoming] in the FORE Library: HIM Body of Knowledge at www.ahima.org.

3. Fenton, Susan H., Kathy Giannangelo, and Mary Stanfill. "Essential People Skills for EHR Implementation Success." *Journal of AHIMA* 77, no. 6 (June 2006): 60A–D.

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