

Turning Grads into Employees. Intern Program Delivers What Grads and Employers Both Want: Experience

Save to myBoK

by Meg Featheringham, assistant editor

If HIM graduates are in such demand, why is it so hard for them to find their first jobs? The reason, of course, is experience. Most employers require it, but few have the resources to develop it. At a time when employers seem to be finding as many challenges hiring as graduates find in being hired, a new recruiting program at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is experimenting with an old approach: internships.

Investing in Recruitment

The VA's two-year internship program was established in 2003, accepting four HIM interns its first year and 10 in its second. Interns are assigned an HIM manager who acts as a preceptor to guide them through their training. Each intern is allotted funding for travel for networking and educational opportunities such as conferences and site visits. Interns have the opportunity to be placed in positions within the VA at the end of the program, allowing the organization to fill roles with trained candidates.

Interns not only learn about the VA's HIM functions, they also receive exposure to its culture. "The VA is a very complex organization, and the HIM internship allows interns to experience what we are all about without having extreme job pressure," says Susan Helbig, MA, RHIA, preceptor and health information administrator at the VA Puget Sound in Seattle, WA. "At the end of two years, when they're ready to step into their first noninternship job, they already have much of that learning and exposure to our culture under their belt."

In looking at the VA's current HIM work force, Susan Lloyd, RHIA, chief of the health information and revenue department at the VA Medical Center in Augusta, GA, says, "I don't think we're unusual in that we have a lot of baby boomers like myself who are looking forward to retirement. We did a review before the program was initiated, and in 2002 we found that only 5 percent of employees were under 30—and that's out of over 350 people that the VA has working in health information. Over three-fourths of them were 40 or over, so we were really concerned that we were going to have this big mass of knowledge retire without having any succession planning in place."

The Intern Experience

The current interns are thrilled with the experience the program has afforded them. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," says Rebecca Ann Wirth, RHIA, who recently moved from the Seattle to the Bedford, MA, facility. "I get to learn what it's like to actually be doing the work and the day-to-day operations and functions, like release of information and coding and transcription. And I also get to learn about the many different areas that HIMS interfaces within the hospital and other departments are important and how we function as a HIMS unit."

Shawana Burch, RHIA, a medical records specialist at Augusta, concurs. "The wonderful thing about this internship and the wonderful thing that I love about my job is that I'm never doing the same two things in one day. I've been exposed to so many various different things by working here that it's just been an awesome experience."

A unique aspect of the program is each intern's ability to customize his or her internship. "Certain aspects of HIM practice [the interns] are required to do, but...they each had a chunk of money for training and travel," says Helbig. "As long as they consulted me and we talked over their travel proposals, they used the money to further their own professional development. One requirement for all the interns is to create a personal development plan, both short term and long term. All of these learning activities feed into that."

Wirth explored different sites throughout the VA network, because “I know that each VA is different and they each have their own spectrum of patients that they see. I wanted to get a feel for what else was out there in the VA, and I went to several different places. I would shadow each of the people in the various HIMs units and then also spend some time with their HIMs chief and talk to them about different managerial issues and organizational structures.”

Adam Chin, RHIA, an intern at the Puget Sound facility, attended conferences to further his professional development. “I have had the opportunity to attend quite a few conferences—VA-sponsored conferences as well as outside-sponsored conferences. During the conferences, I had a chance to increase my knowledge of the HIM field, meet other VA HIMs interns, and introduce myself to many HIMs chiefs from different facilities.”

Finding Their Place

Wirth and Chin are already placed in positions at their new sites. Burch and Ken Green, RHIA, an intern in Augusta, both hope to be placed in positions at the VA. “It’s a great place to work,” Green says. His fellow HIM classmates are a bit envious of his internship at the VA, he says, “because of all the training opportunities that will open so many doors, not just today but way on down the road. They may be in a good job now, but it may be in a place that they can’t really advance and they can’t do but perhaps one specific path or one focus. This internship can take us in so many different directions.”

Helbig says it’s been an honor to act as a preceptor to her interns. “I wish everybody had an opportunity to be both an intern and a preceptor,” she says. “What a wonderful way to learn from the young people.”

Lloyd is eager for the day when the interns become her colleagues. “We’re really looking forward to all these bright young people who are going to be the future leaders in our field in the VA system.”

Meg Featheringham (meg.featheringham@ahima.org) is assistant editor of the Journal of AHIMA.

Article citation:

Featheringham, Meg. "Turning Grads into Employees: Intern Program Delivers What Grads and Employers Both Want: Experience." *Journal of AHIMA* 76, no.6 (June 2005): 36.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

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