

Why You Need to Write for Your Profession

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The May 2014 cover of *Journal of AHIMA* featured an image of a chameleon and the words “Adapt or Disappear.” This hyperbolic warning for health information management (HIM) professionals was delivered in the context of the rapid change impacting healthcare through advancements in technology, organizational structures, and hiring practices. The pivot point for the industry was the widespread adoption of the electronic health record (EHR). The *Journal of AHIMA* article, by Mary Butler, notes: “While the EHR hasn’t changed the need or demand for HIM professionals’ skills, it has drastically changed the way those skills are applied and has accelerated the need for professionals to add new electronic-based abilities.”¹

The methods, tools, and techniques for how health information is collected, managed, and used internally and externally has changed drastically in the last few years, and the skills of health information professionals are not keeping pace because of this speed of change. Because of this, it is extremely important that HIM professionals share their collective best practices in this new era of HIM. One way to do this is by writing articles for magazines and websites on HIM best practices—an act that both improves the profession and the professionals themselves.

Adapting to the New HIM through Shared Best Practices

Butler’s article continues with a sense of optimism: “It isn’t too late. There is still time for HIM professionals to adapt to the new healthcare environment and prosper in its opportunities.”² The purpose of including the image of the chameleon was to drive home this point of adaptation, something to which HIM professionals are no strangers. Just to expand on this a bit, it is important to demonstrate how adaptable (and amazing) chameleons are by providing a few fun facts:

- They have the fastest tongues of any animal (0-60 mph in 1/100 of a second), which increases their ability to catch food.
- Their eyes operate independently and provide a complete 360-degree field of vision. Essentially, they have the ability to run and process two computers and monitors simultaneously.
- They can change color to match their surroundings, becoming their own camouflage.³

It is this last trait that chameleons are most known for and one that historically has also been a trait of HIM professionals. Chameleons have an amazing ability to blend into their surroundings by changing their color and avoiding attention. Like chameleons, HIM professionals have been known for adapting so well within their organizations that they often blend in behind the scenes, not drawing the attention their work so often deserves. HIM professionals have been driven by managing records, ensuring compliance, using pain-staking detail to verify information integrity and maintain financial health. What has now become clear is that the characteristic of camouflage is no longer a strength for the profession, but a vulnerability.

One of the greatest strengths of the HIM profession is its focus on improving the information practices within the healthcare industry. The profession is known for developing, using, and adapting industry practices that are sound for ensuring organizational compliance to standards and guidelines, increasing the integrity of data collection, and protecting health information. The profession is not known for evaluating and sharing these best practices widely with audiences. HIM professionals think their best asset—the ability to innovate HIM practice for organizational benefit—has not been leveraged through information sharing. Many in HIM think the profession needs to evolve and the easy next step is to share what is working (or not working) within one’s organization through publishing.

Publishing is Your Duty

The first thing you might ask yourself is, “Why do I need to publish?” This article could spend considerable time documenting the myriad benefits of publishing, but the authors will leave it at these five points:

1. It's your duty! The HIM Code of Ethics states that it is a HIM professional's obligation to contribute to the Body of Knowledge, as they should "advance health information management knowledge and practice through continuing education, research, publications, and presentations."⁴
2. The profession and practices are changing rapidly, and these practices need to be evaluated for efficacy.
3. There is increased competition for HIM-related positions, and thus documenting HIM expertise is critical. There are many personal benefits to publishing, such as career opportunities, networking, professional growth, and more.
4. There is a need to develop and maintain HIM and professional visibility, and this can be accomplished through highlighting one's expertise.
5. Perhaps most importantly, it is mission-critical to demonstrate the HIM professional's value to the broader healthcare enterprise.

Those who have any hesitation about their ability or inclination to publish should start by asking these questions:

- Do I have a particular area of interest or expertise in a topic area?
- Could others benefit from my knowledge?
- Is there a gap between my knowledge and what's happening in practice?
- Do I want to grow professionally?

Writing is a Process

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then publishing should be in your future. Now that you've been convinced to publish, here are a few steps to begin the process.

Identify and Choose a Topic

This first step can be daunting. A good way to start is by doing some brainstorming. Think about topics or areas of interest and/or experiences you've had. Are there projects you've worked on that others could learn from? Have you implemented something innovative at your organization? Have you addressed a significant issue through the use of data? What are you interested in?

Take five minutes of brainstorming time to jot down any topic ideas that come to mind, without overthinking it, and without judging your ideas. Use that list to find books and articles related to some of those topics. Is there a particular aspect of the topic that piques your interest? Is there a gap in the literature that your contribution could address?

Talk to friends and colleagues about your ideas. They can often provide a perspective you haven't thought of or may even be able to help you with your topic. As you learn more about each topic, continue to refine your ideas so they are manageable. The more you read and talk about your topic, the easier that will be. The most important thing is to pursue a topic you are interested in. Writing about something you are passionate about makes the process much more enjoyable and culminates in a better end product.

Collaborate When You Can

Publishing is a great opportunity to collaborate with other professionals, both within and outside of the HIM discipline. As you are exploring topic ideas, consider colleagues at your organization or other professionals you have worked well with that could serve as co-authors. Perhaps the HIT/HIM program at a local college is looking for opportunities for their faculty or students to collaborate with practicing professionals. Sometimes undertaking a research and writing project with a partner can make it more manageable, not to mention the valuable networking opportunities that may arise through the partnership.

Identify Resources

Once you have chosen your topic, you'll want to conduct a more structured review of the literature and resources that exist to ensure there is enough information available to support you in your topic choice. Think about where you can access the resources you need, such as the library at your organization, online databases, AHIMA's HIM Body of Knowledge (bok.ahima.org), or even the local library.

Build Support

Again, make sure you're talking to people about your project, particularly if you need data and resources from your organization or others. Express the importance of your project and what it can contribute to the organization, the HIM profession, and healthcare.

Begin the Research, Start Writing

Now that you've chosen your topic, identified your resources, and obtained support for your project, you are ready to begin the research for your publication. The main activities at this point are reading, obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (if necessary), collecting/analyzing data, and writing.

Continue exploring the resources you identified and read as much as you can about your topic. Take notes and organize your thoughts to begin the writing process. You may also begin collecting your data if necessary. If you plan on publishing a research article that involves human subjects, approval from an IRB will be required. This must be determined before your research begins, so be sure to factor that step into your process. Once your research is complete, it is time to start writing.

Publishing Helps HIM Stand Out

HIM professionals, it is time for action. Look to the traits of the chameleon, but instead of changing color to camouflage, change your colors to vibrant hues that no one can ignore. Use your adaptability to stand out, display your skills, and tout your knowledge—then publish your work.

It is critical that HIM professionals use their skills to survey the landscape to detect threats. HIM professionals must use their capacity and agility to obtain resources and opportunities, and must acknowledge that what HIM professionals do—how we are making an impact that is meaningful within the HIM profession and also for the industry at large—is vital to the future of healthcare. Historically, HIM professionals have used their camouflage skills to adapt to rapidly changing environments largely unnoticed. Moving forward, HIM professionals need to draw upon this chameleon-like attribute to draw attention to themselves and the entire HIM profession.

Notes

1. Butler, Mary. "Adapt or Disappear: AHIMA's Reality 2016 has a New Mission to Transform the HIM Workforce through Education—or Else." *Journal of AHIMA*, no. 5 (May 2014): 24-29. <http://bok.ahima.org/doc?oid=300443>.
2. Ibid.
3. Mancini, Mark. "10 Colorful Facts About Chameleons." Mental Floss. September 23, 2016. <http://mentalfloss.com/article/85956/10-colorful-facts-about-chameleons>.
4. AHIMA. "Code of Ethics." October 2, 2011. <http://bok.ahima.org/doc?oid=105098>.

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