Why an Informatics Degree Matters

By Mary Butler

The HIM Problem

As HIM becomes increasingly data-centric, knowledge of informatics is becoming an essential tool.

Today, it's hard to identify even one aspect of health information management (HIM) as a profession that isn't profoundly affected by the use, analysis, preservation, governance, or collection of data. Information governance demands sound data governance; coding requires precise data gathering and processing; and privacy and security functions involve a clear understanding of how to protect data. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that familiarity—or even fluency—within informatics is becoming a must-have on the list of skills in an HIM professional's toolkit.

The Problem Solver

Cathy Brownfield, MSHI, RHIA, CCS, vice president, operations at Trust HCS, recognized this about five years ago and pursued her master's of science in health information (MSHI) on top of her undergraduate degree in HIM and her CCS credential. She started her degree at around the same time that she became co-owner of TrustHCS. She wanted to advance her education, and everywhere she looked, she saw that technology was driving HIM.

She admits that HIM today isn't what it was when she graduated from college with her undergraduate degree in 1997.

"We were really dealing with the physical chart and everything about it, tracking the chart through the hospital, doing admission and discharge statistics. It just really hit me now that HIM is really turning in what I call a higher function. It's not just about where the chart is, where it is in the department or in the hospital. It's more about the data as a whole, and what can we do with the data," Brownfield says.

What A Degree in Informatics Gets You

Perhaps surprisingly, plenty of HIM professionals—and even those who don't work in HIM—have degrees in informatics but have no mention of the specialty in their job title or job description.

Brownfield says that when she was charting her educational path, it would've made sense to advance her career with a business degree or a master's in HIM, especially since she had just become the co-owner of a coding company, but she felt an informatics degree matched her passion for data and technology. Competency in informatics is also helpful as HIM professionals are being asked to lead.

"Whether it's implementations privacy and security, population health—that's a huge area where informatics can help out, as we start to try to figure out how to pull all of this data out across large populations."

Her knowledge of informatics helps her follow industry trends and understand the challenges her clients are struggling with as well.

"I would say that no matter what you're doing, whether pursuing a degree or not, we all should constantly be looking to learn and innovate no matter what you're doing. Whether it's getting the degree or an additional credential or learning more about hot topics," Brownfield says.

Having a degree in informatics lends her credibility with clients and within the industry, she says.

The Role of Informatics in Quality

According to Brownfield, individuals with informatics training are constantly looking for new ways to improve data and analyze it, a skill that's important as the healthcare industry shifts its focus to quality. Informaticists help design workflows that help physicians and HIM professionals capture more accurate, useful data at the point of care—a key to clinical documentation improvement efforts (CDI).

"One of the things we're doing in CDI, which is all about analyzing the data and the documentation, is trying to figure out how we can improve that. What is needed to have the data as clean as we can at the beginning? Informatics can be helpful in that area," Brownfield says.

As EHRs grow and expand, it becomes more important to figure out how to use those systems efficiently, Brownfield says. And part of that is figuring out how to make the physician query process better. Informaticists, she says, look for patterns in documentation data and can pinpoint which areas CDI specialists and coders are querying physicians about.

"When you can identify those patterns and trends, it's easier to go in and figure out a workflow trigger or a prompt for the physicians to maybe get that documented up front," Brownfield explains. "All of that has to do with the data—but also having the knowledge to be able to correct those issues at the front end."

Mary Butler is the associate editor at The Journal of AHIMA.

Original source:
Butler, Mary. "Why an Informatics Degree Matters" (Journal of AHIMA), April 2015.
