Your Job in the E-health Era

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by AHIMA's E-health Task Force

Are you ready to work in the e-health era? This excerpt from "Report on the Roles and Functions of E-health Information Management," a recent white paper by AHIMA's E-health Task Force, describes the many skills HIM professionals already have that can easily translate to a role in an e-health organization.

From HIM to E-HIM

The knowledge and expertise of managing the handwritten medical records containing source patient data has evolved from independent management of paper medical records in settings across the continuum of care to scanning the paper documents for multiple user access, to entering data into automated systems that generate electronic patient data, to integrated delivery systems that electronically manage the patient across the continuum of care, to network integration and e-health information management.

HIM professionals remain actively involved in developing effective processes to preserve patient privacy, confidentiality, and security. This is because the introduction of the Internet for accessing, transferring, and transmitting health information expanded the uses of source patient data (i.e., the medical record as HIM professionals traditionally know it) as Internet-based business-to-business companies and business-to-consumer companies flourished.

Skills We Bring to the E-health Table

In traditional and e-healthcare organizations, HIM professionals are responsible for managing two basic healthcare business objectives:

- enabling the collection and storage of complete, accurate, and legal health information
- facilitating the use of health information for patient care, quality evaluation, reimbursement, compliance, utilization management, education, research, funding, and in legal proceedings.

The first objective is accomplished in the traditional setting through functions generally consolidated and managed under the auspices of the HIM director. It includes such functions as record assembly, analysis, coding and abstracting, correspondence, special registries, and medical transcription.

The second objective includes use of the information through functions such as creating and maintaining efficient filing and retrieval systems, master patient indices, chart and information retrieval and filing, release of information, and data retrieval for quality assurance, registries (e.g., tumor, trauma), and other evaluative purposes.

Objective One: Data Collection

Designing systems that facilitate the efficient collection of complete, accurate, and legal health information

Health information meets the business record rule when a party to the transaction, at the time of the transaction, records it. It is then discoverable and admissible in a court of law, thus creating the legal nature of the data. Medical and legal issues are not areas of expertise for system developers, nor are they necessarily top of mind for clinicians who must also be involved in the design of health information systems.

The nature of e-health systems with distributed databases (e.g., lab results maintained on a computer in one state, pharmacy records in another, etc.) also brings a new level of complexity to defining the legal system of record. This applies to the legal request for production of records as well as implementing appropriate record retention schedules.

Thus, the role of the HIM professional is to bring that expertise and those priorities into the design process so that health records that are created will be complete and accurate, appropriately displayed for varying uses, and consistent with the business record rule and other legal requirements as appropriate.

HIM professionals understand the business processes inherent in the healthcare delivery system. System developers are computer engineers who take system designs and turn them into usable software. Developers are exposed to healthcare databases such as ICD-9-CM or CPT tabular lists, but they do not know about diagnostic or procedure coding conventions or requirements.

The HIM professional's expertise is to be able to conceptualize a useful system design that accounts for the best ways to categorize information, sequence information, and reflect chronology sources, and otherwise appropriately use the health information. The HIM professional will partner with a developer in this type of scenario.

HIM professionals should also be involved in facilitating decisions to identify who should be collecting varying types of information, security levels of access for various data types and categories, how often information should be collected and recorded, how it is authenticated and how the quality of the information can be assessed. Collaborating with skilled system developers, the HIM professional's broad knowledge of clinical data as well as the processes that the data support will enhance the health information systems created for use in e-health organizations.

Managing the ongoing development and implementation of products and services

Knowledgeable product managers are needed to facilitate initial design and provide the feedback loop users and developers need to continue the iterative process of system development. HIM professionals have the skills to be the conduit for that communication, translating the evolving needs of users to the developers' language. A product manager manages the implementation of systems necessary to support personal health records, Web site content, and other projects.

Managing regulatory, licensure, certification, and voluntary accreditation activities

The HIM professional is trained in regulatory and accreditation concepts. As e-health pervades the industry, new federal and states laws are being passed as well as voluntary accreditation programs for self-regulation. AHIMA has published principles for privacy and quality of e-health information; the American Accreditation HealthCare Commission (URAC) has initiated a healthcare Web site accreditation program (www.urac.org); Hi-Ethics has developed ethical principles for healthcare on the Internet (www.hiethics.com).

Privacy and security of personal information on the Internet are currently high-profile concerns. There is no one more knowledgeable or better trained in privacy and confidentiality of health information than the HIM professional. Technical issues created by the Internet and electronic environment are new content areas in which to explore their implications on the management processes.

Managing compliance activities related to FDA/EPA/ADA

The high level of expertise with regulatory issues in general (such as reimbursement compliance activities and the complex fraud and abuse regulatory issues) allows the HIM professional to easily fill the gap in e-health companies in implementing other compliance requirements such as those imposed by the Food and Drug Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, Americans with Disabilities Act, etc.

Consumer sites

Many e-health consumer sites collect and maintain consumer health information. The extent of information varies, as does the purpose for its collection. Consumer sites have created a whole new area of concern as they are largely unregulated and frequently run by people not grounded in healthcare issues. HIPAA does not cover consumer sites per se. A few states such as Texas are in the process of passing laws to cover this uncharted territory.

The HIM professional can fill several key roles in a consumer oriented e-health organization: privacy officer, computer-based patient record consultant, product manager, and data quality manager, to name a few.

Objective Two: Facilitating Information Use

Assuring authorized access to individuals with a need to know

HIM practice in e-health includes the traditional "keeper of the medical record" role with an expansion of new responsibilities. HIM professionals should be involved at the policy level in an e-health organization to establish standards for protecting the privacy of client information and educating others in the organization on issues surrounding healthcare information management. They may seek positions as privacy officers, information security officers, or compliance officers.

HIM professionals in an e-health company may be charged with the overall responsibility of assuring that health information is available to all authorized users for the approved and authorized purposes for which it was collected. They also have the requisite skills at an operational level for developing procedures that give access to information to authorized individuals including the client, caregivers, employees of the e-health company who have a need to know for operational purposes, and others determined solely by the client.

An HIM professional can work with the product development and operations teams to advise on system security. This may include physical security as well as technological security such as the creation of audit trails and tools required to monitor who has accessed client health information in the system.

Finally, HIM professionals may be responsible for conducting regular audits of the system to monitor who has seen patient information to assure compliance with the policies and procedures. This also dovetails with auditing data quality for validity and reliability to ensure that data are not garbled in transmission or other manipulation. Such a position may be called a quality control, audit, or compliance manager.

Developing processes that support reimbursement

HIM professionals are qualified to identify data that need to be collected and reported for billing purposes. As coded data are likely to drive reimbursement methodologies indefinitely, highly skilled HIM professionals who understand the coding classification and reimbursement systems are needed in system design as well as operation. Human intervention is still required to generate accurate data for billing based on substantiated health information in the system.

While much of that data will be automated in the future, a role for coded data quality review is essential. The complexity of the healthcare reimbursement system dictates a high level of expertise in system design as well as operation and ongoing monitoring. These are all roles that the HIM professional can easily embrace, whether in a provider's business office, a clearinghouse data center, or a payer's adjudication office.

Managing documentation quality review activities

Assuring the completeness and accuracy of health information may be done in part through program edits designed by HIM professionals. However, edits and design elements will not catch all potential problems and monitoring the health information that is actually collected and stored will be an important function to develop in e-health companies. Working with application database managers, data quality reliability and validity checks can be routinely performed as part of the regular operational procedures. HIM professionals are well suited to work with clinicians to identify critical indicators, which need to be reviewed by human beings.

Where Do You Fit In?

"Revolution" is an overused word, but when applied to the effect of all that is digital, automated, or electronic in the healthcare industry, it is entirely accurate. Over the last decade, established relationships, value chains, and strategies have been radically altered or swept away.

As the revolution continues, the "front-line" challenge to HIM professionals is clear. They can allow the technologies to roll uncontrolled through and around their organizations—in effect, handing over their rich knowledge base and expert skills to faster-moving, better-focused professionals in professions that don't even exist yet. Or they can understand the potential of the Internet and control and direct its power to the benefit of their customers, health plan members, and patients.

Where Will You Work?

HIM professionals are well suited for several roles within e-health organizations. Here's an overview:

Role	Description
Domain manager	Owns responsibility for a defined body of knowledge such as HIM, coding, laboratory, pharmacy, etc. Knowledge and authority may cross organizational lines as they maintain the integrity of the technical implementation of that body of knowledge. May work closely with product managers, operations staff, quality control, etc.
Project manager	Manages the implementation of systems necessary to support personal health records, Web site content, and other projects.
Medical language and classification expert systems	Employs skills in the design and use of medical vocabularies and classification; defines data and retrieves information from e-health systems.
Compliance officer	Designs, implements, and maintains a compliance program that assures conformity to all types of regulatory and voluntary accreditation requirements governing the provision of healthcare products or services via the Internet.
Information security expert	Designs, implements, or maintains an information security program that balances requirements of privacy, integrity, and availability of data. Understands the legal and social issues related to information security.
Patient information coordinator	Provides services to patients wanting to understand how to optimize their experience on the e-health Web site and create and maintain accuracy of their personal health records. Educates patients on protecting the privacy of their personal health information.
Reimbursement manager	Designs systems and procedures that assure generation of accurate clinical documentation needed to substantiate billing. Also involved in designing systems to efficiently classify information for billing. Develops and implements systems to assure the secure transfer of required data to billing centers, clearinghouses, or third-party payers.
Data quality manager	Ensures the quality of health information by performing quality reliability and validity checks. Develops reports and advises clinicians on identifying critical indicators.
Privacy officer	Oversees all ongoing activities related to the development, implementation, maintenance of, and adherence to the organization's policies and procedures covering the privacy of, and access to, patient health information in compliance with federal and state laws and the healthcare organization's information privacy practices.
Product manager	Responsible for overall implementation of a specific product or product line. This may include coordinating and managing the use, case design, development, quality control, version control, modifications and updates, etc.

To Learn More

To read the entire white paper, "Report on the Roles and Functions of e-Health Information Management," go to:

- the E-health Community of Practice at www.ahima.org
- the AHIMA Library, the Association's online body of knowledge, at www.ahima.org

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