

HIM Professionals Are Finding New Ways to Work

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(Editor's note: This is the debut of a new ADVANCE column called Hands-On Help. This exclusive column is designed to help readers cope with the changes occurring in the health information management [HIM] industry.)

"Security is a superstition. It does not exist in nature...Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

With this quotation, attributed to Helen Keller, I welcome you to the debut of the "Hands-On Help" column. This exclusive column is designed to help readers see the opportunities and meet the challenges of the changing workplace for HIM professionals. The intent is to help HIM professionals formulate thoughtful questions and consider a fuller range of options, as they determine how to practice in ways that will best serve the health care community.

The world of work is changing. In the last decade, outsourcing and telecommuting are two key ways in which organizations have dramatically changed the way work is accomplished. The flexibility gained by organizations and employees is exciting, but also fraught with anxiety.

The loss of familiar structures and pathways is uncomfortable and can be perceived as a threat to livelihoods. For workers, these changes have raised concerns about job security and career paths. In organizations, managers are being challenged to rethink organizational structures, productivity standards, budgets, quality standards and the challenge of managing staff in remote locations.

Portfolio Careers as an Alternative

No longer do new graduates exclusively look for a career path from entry level to the top of an organization. Many realize they can stake out areas of expertise and offer themselves to organizations in varying employment relationships. Charles Handy, author of *Beyond Certainty: The Changing Worlds of Organizations*, describes this approach to work as "portfolio living." Many professionals will serve out their careers as independent contractors to multiple organizations that want to acquire certain skills and expertise on an as-needed basis. This independent, entrepreneurial way of life is satisfying to some, but not to all people.

Staffing Companies Employ Portfolio Professionals

Many HIM professionals have found a way to have the best of the new and the old worlds of work. They choose to work for HIM staffing companies, which may act as their agents, finding them temporary work or offering them full- or part- time employment with a traditional employer-employee relationship.

Until a few years ago staffing companies were thought of primarily as employment agencies and temporary services. Today's staffing companies, however, may include long-term outsourcing of whole departments, functions or processes; professional employment organizations (PEOs); outplacement services; or "temp to hire" options. In 1994, recognizing a trend toward more variety in staffing solutions, the National Association

of Temporary and Staffing Services (NATSS) added the term “staffing” to its name. “Staffing” under this more encompassing definition is the country’s fastest growing industry.

Three-Way Relationship Challenges

The most significant challenge of either using staffing services, or of working for a staffing company, is that this option creates a three-way relationship. A manager in a health care facility, the manager at a staffing company and an HIM professional assigned to provide services to the client facility all collaborate to get the organization’s work done. Most of us find the direct employer-employee relationship challenging enough to manage successfully. Making these into three-way relationships certainly increases their complexity. If telecommuting is a component of the staffing arrangement, the management challenge bar is raised even further.

For example, a health care facility hires a transcription company to type over-flow reports. The company uses home-based staff to transcribe and transmit reports to the client facility. Quality and productivity monitoring are done through the home office of the company. When the employee has questions about dictation, she is told to contact a supervisor at the client site for direction. The employee serves two masters, both from a distance. This is a situation that can provide many opportunities for misunderstandings if processes have not been clearly determined and communicated to all parties involved in the engagement. Therein lay the challenges. Processes must be well defined and communication among all parties must be superb.

How does each of the three parties in the staffing relationship lay the groundwork for a successful engagement? What are the relationship principles of triads that each party would benefit from knowing? How is a facility’s regular staff affected by the temporary or permanent presence of contract staff? How are customers of the HIM department affected by these relationships? These and other questions about the new work culture will be explored in future installments of this new column.

These are interesting times in which to live, but they are also confusing times. HIM professionals are making important decisions about their work lives, and those working in health care facilities are also making key decisions about how HIM services will be delivered in their organizations. Surely life in the “New World of Work” will be a daring adventure.

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