

9/18/00

Exploring Health Care Information System Roles for HIM Professionals

Patty Thierry, MBA, RHIA, CCS

Thank you to Advance Magazine for permission to use this article

This month, at the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) 2000 National Convention, Brenda Olsen, vice president for health information management (HIM) at Great Plains Health Alliance/Midwest Health Systems and I will present "HIM professionals in the IS trenches." In preparation for our presentation, we have had the opportunity to talk with professionals around the country who are using their HIM skills in information systems (IS) roles. These professionals are as varied in their experiences, as their work settings. However, they have three things in common—they are motivated to use technology to solve health care related business problems; they use their HIM skills and experience to get the work done; and they are not afraid to take risks.

Opening the Doors to IS

Many HIM professionals who migrated to IS roles knew they wanted a challenge but didn't know exactly what kind. Thanks to a mentor and/or a network of peers, they have been able to realize that experience gained while implementing systems, cleaning up the MPI, upgrading an encoder or beta testing technology prepared them to take on more technology related projects.

To expand their exposure to IS, some voluntarily took on IS roles for technology projects within their current HIM role. This group of professionals deliberately migrated toward IS roles for a chance to use their HIM skills in a completely different way. Others were given an IS opportunity based on their past track record with testing systems during up-grades or the role they played in IS-related projects. A number of individuals sought formal education in IS (typically a bachelors in computer science or a Masters in System Analysis) and actively applied for and obtained health care IS-related jobs.

HIM professionals have successfully assumed IS roles in HIM, IS or clinical departments that involve the implementation, maintenance and end-user training of HIM or clinical systems. These roles require additional IS education gained from continuing education, on-the-job experience or in some cases formal education. The route to additional knowledge seems to depend on two factors: how they like to learn and the types of projects and opportunities they are exposed to on a regular basis. The most common method of acquiring IS skills, for the HIM professionals I spoke with, is a combination of on-the-job "training" and continuing education.

The most important skills learned include: fundamentals of relational databases, IS planning, systems analysis, design and maintenance, and systems implementation (which includes project management).

Information Systems Competencies

Working with health care technology requires HIM professionals to sharpen their project management, computer literacy and communication skills. It also requires an understanding of health care computing trends (see ADVANCE, May 1, 2000, Hands-On Help) and IS in general.

Last year, AHIMA distributed the “1999 Professional Development Inventory” tool. This tool provides a way for HIM professionals to assess their current skill and desired skill levels. If you are interested in pursuing an IS role or simply enhancing your current role to include IS functions, this assessment is a must. There are two areas that deal with IS skills: information technology and health information systems. The skills identified in these areas are:

1. Computer concepts
2. Personal computers
3. Database management
4. Data security and integrity
5. Networks and data communications
6. Clinical data management
7. Computer-based patient record system
8. Systems analysis and design
9. System selection process
10. User interface design

AHIMA is currently updating the 1999 Professional Development Inventory, which will be available on the AHIMA Web site, www.ahima.org, by the end of this year. Use this tool to help you assess your current knowledge and build a plan for acquiring new knowledge in the areas that interest you.

IS Roles for HIM Professionals

There are several roles that are frequently advertised in various HIM and IS trade journals. These roles cross all care settings and include:

- Clinical system analysts—Individuals who coordinate, analyze, implement, train and monitor system integrity for HIM or other clinical systems.
- Database administrator—Individuals who coordinate project structure between users, vendors or programmers and assist in planning, training, testing, installation and support.
- Database reporting analysts—Individuals who assist in analysis, planning, creation and maintenance of simple to moderately complex database projects, develop reports and analyze the data.
- Clinical systems trainer—Individuals who primarily train end-users and participate in sales presentations.
- Security officer—Individuals responsible for managing the security of all electronically maintained information; including promulgation of security requirements, policies and privilege systems, and the audit of performance.

AHIMA has also identified additional emerging roles as outlined in its Vision 2006 work. As you read the descriptions of these roles, note the reliance on information systems skills.

- Health Information Manager. This high-level HIM position requires an in-depth knowledge of IS. Working with information executives and users, this position is responsible for advancing systems, data quality, data usability and information security.
- Data Quality Manager. Data management functions include monitoring data integrity throughout the organization beginning with data dictionary and policy development, including quality monitoring and audits. In an e-health environment, DQ managers are responsible for the quality of and access to information, in addition to the presentation of information and how information is indexed on a site.
- Data Resource Administrator. The next generation of records and data management using media such as the computer-based patient record (CPR), data repository and electronic warehousing for meeting current and future care needs across the continuum, providing access to the needed information and ensuring

long-term integrity and access.

- Research and Decision Support Analyst. Support senior management with information for decision making and strategy development, using a variety of analytical tools and databases. Work with product and policy organizations on high-level analysis projects such as clinical trials and outcomes research.

These roles are scalable and may focus more toward the entire enterprise rather than on HIM functions. These roles require HIM and IS skills. HIM skills alone will not meet the technical and strategic complexity these roles require, and IS skills without the HIM skills will yield flawed data systems and outcomes.

Gaining IS Skills and Knowledge

There are many ways to gain additional IS skills and knowledge, but they all require an investment in professional development and the patience to obtain new skills. This investment will be well worth the effort, as it will undoubtedly open new doors, make you more marketable and provide more job options. If you are interested in an IS role or simply want to be more technology savvy, let the following steps be your guide:

1. Become computer literate if you aren't already. This is your top priority. To help you assess your computer literacy, review the Computer Literacy Checklist published in the Hands-on Help column of the May 29, 2000 and June 26, 2000 issues of ADVANCE. This checklist is based on the adaptation of several tools used by universities and organizations. The best way to address the skills you lack is with hands-on practice. There are numerous books, audiotapes and videos to help you master the basics outlined in the Computer Literacy Checklist.

2. Use the AHIMA professional development inventory to assess your current IS skills and develop a learning plan. Once you have identified the areas you want to master, and depending on how you like to learn, you have several resource options available to you:

- Volunteer for IS related projects (it is the best way to learn)
- Take information systems classes at your local university (some universities offer online course work in this area)
- Take advantage of computer training classes offered by your employer and apply skills learned in your day-to-day work
- Enroll in online courses such as AHIMA's interactive Learning Campus at www.universalcampus.com/ahimacampus, which provides a convenient and economical way to get up to speed;
- Purchase books, audiocassettes, conduct an Internet search for articles on certain subjects; and
- Seek formal academic training with a concentration in information systems.

3. Keep your HIM skills current because IS skills are enhanced by your HIM competencies.

4. Read technology-related magazines on a regular basis. Include health care technology and general business technology content.

5. Network and learn from your colleagues and the vendor community.

Patty Thierry is chief information officer (CIO) at Care Communications Inc., Chicago. She can be contacted via e-mail at pthierry@care-communications.com.