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Are Your Technology Skills Sharper

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The end of the year is a natural time for self-reflection. Because this a technology column that has a self-help focus, it seems appropriate for you to reflect on the following: Are your technology skills sharper today than they were 11 months ago? Would you consider yourself computer literate? Have you developed and implemented a technology-learning plan? Are you aware of technology trends that will impact your work environment?

A “yes” answer to each of these questions means you are well on your way to holding your own within today’s information age. A “no” answer to any of these questions requires additional effort on your part. Health information management (HIM) professionals who invest in building their technology skills have the ability to perform their jobs more competently. Because technology supports the management of health data—from coding to data storage and data access—implementing a technology-learning plan is necessary for continued employment and for career advancement. Constantly improving oneself is even more than an HIM career goal, it is a way of life.

This year’s Hands On Help column focused on the importance of being technology savvy. During the year, we evaluated trends and their impact on HIM professionals. We also reviewed basic computer skills and identified learning plans for key technology topics. (To revisit the technology topics and learning plans, head to ADVANCE’s Web site at www.ADVANCEforHIM.com and click on the “Hands-On Help” link.)

This month’s column highlights five critical topics discussed in this column and reviews the important “take home” points for the year 2000. If you haven’t started your technology-learning plan, use the topics discussed here to guide you. If you are on your way, use the highlights to validate that you are on the right track.

Technology 101

Taking Stock of Your Computer Skills

Computer literacy is a core competency for HIM professionals. The best way to determine your current computer literacy is to inventory your skills. An inventory will identify knowledge gaps and serve as the first step in developing your technology-learning plan. Basic computer literacy skills include creating spreadsheets and simple databases, file management and navigating the Internet.

Own a Computer and Get Wired

The best way to become computer literate is to own a personal computer. Computers have become very affordable and essential in our daily lives. At a minimum, use your home computer to manage your finances, maintain family health records, keep in touch with friends, play games with your children, create a family Web site (www.myfamily.com) and keep up with your continuing education through online course work. The truths discussed in this column are applicable today when you are seeking to purchase a personal computer

as a Christmas present. Be sure to review this column to make sure you are making good choices.

Telecommuting—Remote Coding

The most significant advancement in HIM is remote coding. At the beginning of 2000, there were very few coders coding from remote locations. Today, many coders are working from their home office. This is being made possible by highly wired hospitals that maintain comprehensive data repositories and remote telecommunications capabilities or by the introduction of HIM staffing companies using an application service provider (ASP) model to deliver remote coding capabilities. Remote coding is becoming widely accepted and is similar in concept to remote transcription. Employers who offer remote coding are more attractive to coders than employers who don't. Furthermore, geography or the preference to work from home is no longer a barrier to finding quality staff. Telecommuting is making recruitment much easier for HIM managers and offering quality of life options to coders.

While the adoption rate for remote coding is still in its infancy stage, it is sure to be one the biggest trends in HIM technology in the coming year. Health care organizations can choose to implement their own technology or to use the coding services and/or technology provided by HIM staffing vendors. The technology used by vendors varies and requires a thorough understanding.

Key Health Care Trends

Monitoring health care trends is a requirement for today's technology savvy HIM professional. Many health care trends are opening doors for HIM professionals who are comfortable marrying their HIM skills with technology initiatives. If you have ever found yourself looking up and the technologies that your profession uses have changed, then you might feel that you have missed the boat. Studying the regular evolution to HIM trends puts you in the position where you can be ready for these changes as the business logic to apply them occurs.

The key trends to watch include:

- Use of Internet technologies in health care;
- Consumer held personal health records;
- Using clinical information systems, such as order entry systems, to reduce medical errors;
- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) planning and implementation of final regulations; and
- Managed care organizations (MCOs) revamping their information systems to meet consumer needs.

In addition to the above trends, a handful of new and matured information systems emerge as the latest technology applications likely to be adopted in the next few years. Implementation of these systems require HIM expertise.

- Speech recognition
- Natural language processing
- Integration of Picture Archiving Systems (PACS) and Radiology Information Systems (RIS)
- Wireless devices used by health care practitioners to capture clinical data
- Clinical decision support systems
- Integrated billing systems (hospital and physician billing)
- Integrated patient registrations within an integrated delivery system

Leveraging Internet Technologies

Deploying Internet technologies is as much a future trend as a current trend. As bandwidth goes up and costs go down, the use of the Internet in our world will continue to thrive. The use of the Internet to solve a future

business need is more of a question of when...not if.

Understanding the language of the Internet and your organization's plans to deploy it needs to be on the top of your "to do" list. You need to be Internet literate and able to understand how implementing Internet technologies affects HIM functions.

In some instances, you can drive the use of Internet technologies through outsourcing arrangements with an ASP. If you keep thinking that there has got to be a better way, you should be seeking opportunities for developing cooperative relationships with a third-party vendor. The ASP relationship is a shared risk business model that can decrease some of your staffing or infrastructure support costs. Dictation, transcription and coding are HIM functions that are delivered via an ASP model. Chief information officers (CIOs) and chief financial officers (CFOs) are most likely to accept the implementation of technology via an ASP because of the low overhead, reduced in-house technical support requirements, increased gains in efficiency and attractive pricing options.

Information Technology (IT) Priorities

The bottom line when examining IT priorities today is the goal to drive down the cost of doing business. Anything health care organizations can do to increase productivity and be competitive is critical. According to the 11th Annual Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) Leadership Survey, the top three IT priorities defined by IT professionals are:

- Deploying the Internet;
- Preparing for HIPAA; and
- Upgrading network infrastructure.

HIM professionals need to have solid working relationships with their IT counterparts. The health care IT industry is facing enormous challenges in 2001 and will need the support and expertise of HIM professionals. It's in the HIM professional's best interest to educate IT on HIM functions and their technology needs. It's likely that your IT needs are not a priority next year. What will you do? How do you plan to get them on the IT priority list?

2001 Learning Plan

With the basics behind us, the 2001 learning plans will focus on specific HIM technology and trends in health care and IT. Becoming more familiar with HIM technology enables more productive work and better decision-making when selecting technology solutions. And a big picture view of trends facilitates planning and identifying opportunities for HIM expertise.

Next year, Leslie Fox, president of Care Communications Inc., and I will share this column, bringing you the latest in technology and HIM practice. Happy holidays and best wishes for a productive and happy 2001!

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