

The HIM Workforce Shortage: An Opportunity to Employ Four Generations **October, 2011**

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LESLIE: Jobs are certainly on the minds of all Americans today and our hearts go out to those who are unemployed. It is paradoxical that in some industries not enough qualified job applicants are available; HIM professionals are facing just such a challenge. HIM directors in particular are struggling to find and retain the highly skilled coders, abstractors and cancer registrars needed to meet the data quality demands of today's healthcare industry.

PATTY: These shortages are bound to get worse with new cancer program standards coming in 2012 and the transition to ICD-10/PCS in 2013. However, at times of crisis, there is risk and opportunity. HIM professionals who are leading their organizations through the great changes of our time can and must find creative ways to get the work done.

LESLIE: One unique opportunity that we have in the 21st Century is to employ people from four generations -- expanding the size of the labor pool. We can seek out people from the highly experienced traditionalist and boomer generations who are working longer than past generations, to the generations X and Y who gain vital experience while working alongside more experienced professionals.

PATTY: Not only is developing a multi-generational team a way to reduce the workforce shortage, but it is also a way to improve performance. When you attract and retain talented people of all ages, you are better able to meet the needs of a diverse public; your multi-generational team can relate more effectively to the diversity across the organization and in the community your organization serves.

LESLIE: It all sounds good, however, managing four generations and taking full advantage of this opportunity has its challenges. I think we should include in our discussion this month Barbara Black, director of human resources at Care Communications Inc., to tell us more about the opportunities and challenges of managing four generations.

BARBARA: Thank you for inviting me to talk about this subject, for which I have a real passion. In the midst of so much turmoil in the job market, a multi-generational workplace is an important part of the solution.

PATTY: Barbara, please tell us how the four generations are defined.

BARBARA: They are defined by the birth year: the traditionalist generation (aka the World War II Generation) was born before 1946, the baby boom generation between 1946 and 1964, generation X from 1965 to 1980, and generation Y from 1981 to 2000. Studies of each generation show they each have different goals, each were influenced by the seminal events that occurred in their formative years, and as you might expect they have different attitudes, values and expectations about the workplace.

LESLIE: Being aware of these differences is important if HIM managers are to attract and retain people from multiple generations.

BARBARA: That's right. To successfully lead multiple generations, leaders must communicate to each generation in a way that makes sense to them, accommodate their differences, create attractive workplace choices for each and build on the unique strengths of each generation.

PATTY: Can you give us some examples?

BARBARA: Sure. Let's look at their varying goals. The goal of the traditionalists has been to build a legacy; the baby boomers, want to put their stamp on things; generation X has always defied labels. Their goal is to maintain independence. Generation Y (aka the Millennials) is the fastest growing generation, and their goal is to create life and work that has meaning.

LESLIE: What strikes me about those goals is what they also have in common. None of the goals is about making a lot of money. One's life work and one's sense of self are intertwined and transcend the economic by-product of working. Understanding the commonalities, as well as the differences, is critical in connecting with each generation.

PATTY: While the generations have much in common, each was influenced differently by various wars, varying economic circumstances and other historical events that occurred during their formative years. I think one of the biggest differences across the generations is that each came of age in the workplace using different technology -- each new technology enabling workers to become more productive, and also influencing their preferred forms of communication.

BARBARA: Absolutely. For example, the traditionalists tend to prefer memos, letters and personal notes; the baby boomers prefer phone calls and personal interaction; generation X likes voice mail and e-mail; and generation Y is all about instant messaging, text messages and e-mails. It is important to take these preferences into account when you communicate with people in each generation.

PATTY: Let's talk about a common problem that a multigenerational workplace can solve. It has always been challenging for new graduates to get the experience necessary to become proficient in HIM specialties such as coding and cancer registry. We have ample opportunity to pair newer professionals with the more seasoned professionals, to foster mentoring relationships as a way to transfer the knowledge of one generation to the next.

LESLIE: Such relationships are also very rewarding at the personal level. I remember being mentored in my first job in the late 1960s by a retired coder who was still coding as a volunteer. She fell one day, fracturing her hip and wrist, and was hospitalized for the next 2 months. Every morning I would code the records, and then take them to her hospital room. In the afternoon she would go over each case, explaining to me how to think through each case and carefully apply the coding rules. She was an inspiration, and through that mentoring relationship, she instilled in me the passion for data quality that I have today.

BARBARA: And remember mentoring can be reciprocal. As senior coders may struggle with adjusting to electronic health records (EHRs) and new encoders, the younger generation can patiently help them learn to use the new tools.

PATTY: Barbara, how would you sum up the best practices needed to achieve a productive, engaged and age-neutral workforce for our readers?

BARBARA: Here are five practices I think are especially important:

- 1. Think about whether or not you are fostering a welcoming workplace culture -- making sure you are open to a multi-generational workforce, and facilitating open and honest conversations about generational differences, as well as the shared values.*
- 2. Reward managers who work deliberately to meet the needs of multiple generations on their team, and who make a priority of transferring knowledge between people of different generations.*
- 3. Be open to phased retirement programs; reach out to employees who are nearing retirement while they are still making their plans and before they give you their letter of resignation. Let them know you value them and there will be opportunities to work part time rather than retiring completely. Or, encourage them to gain proficiency with computer technology so that they can work from home.*
- 4. Consider "alumni programs"-- reach out to recently retired employees and encourage them to return to the workplace, even if it is part-time. Provide the continuing education needed to bring them back up to speed.*
- 5. Think about benefits that are suited to each employee's stage of life. Make sure flexible work options extend to all generations -- younger employees with young families can benefit from telecommuting or job sharing, as can people with older parents or a family member who needs someone at home.*

LESLIE: Thank you Barbara for getting us thinking about how we can leverage four generations as one way to overcome staffing shortages and create a more flexible and richer workplace experience.

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