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RESOURCE CENTER

By Michelle Martin

## How to 'Grow Your Own' Coders

**The key to creating great coders is training the right people.**

ALTHOUGH MANY HIRING managers are fortunate to have a surplus of capable applicants these days, managers in the HIM department are still dealing with a shortage of qualified medical coders. For hospitals and other health care facilities, a lack of proficient coders has resulted in decreased productivity and diminished revenue cycle performance.

To improve this situation, some hospitals are turning to personnel who are not currently in the field, but may have an interest in becoming coders, allowing them to keep coding in-house and better meet revenue goals. By "growing" coders from within, hospitals can alleviate some of the pressures caused by the shallow talent pool. The key to creating great coders is in the training, and in training the right people.

### OUTSOURCE CODER TRAINING

Outside resources such as staffing firms can offer quick and comprehensive coder training programs to HIM departments. Staffing firms specializing in HIM provide coding expertise and proven training programs honed from best practices. If budgets are really tight, HIM departments can even forego bringing in a trainer and instead purchase a training course.

If a hospital's coders are already trained, but the organization wants outside verification of their coding processes, the same partners can assist there, too. Many firms offer quality assurance audits.

### CAPTURE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

When management has decided on a training program to facilitate promoting from within, they should be sure the potential staff actually meet the job requirements for coders. Although education and experience are important factors, personality type is an important determinant. Not typically social butterflies, coders are often introverted and thrive on a structured environment where they can code all day and then clock out.

Beyond specific personality traits, a coding candidate should also possess knowledge of medical terminology, anatomy, physiology and pharmacology. The best candidates often come directly from the medical records department. An analyst or someone in a clerical position already understands how to navigate through records and must simply be taught how to code.

It is possible to recruit a staff member without the proper education, but it would be recommended for the potential coder to take some college courses in anatomy, physiology and phar-

macology. A hospital may also require the staff member to pass a medical coding certification examination to become a certified professional coder (CPC-H), certified coding associate (CCA) or certified coding specialist (CCS).

Most hospitals have tuition reimbursement programs and will expect staff to simultaneously attend school and undergo coder training. If the hospital invests in a person's training, it is wise to have the staff member sign a contract to stay with the hospital for a certain amount of time and attain a required grade point average, or he or she must reimburse the facility for education costs.

Coder training programs vary based on job function. Ancillary or outpatient coders for diagnostic centers will require only a few weeks of training because these coders will use a small range of codes, typically coding about 240 charts per day. Training for a hospital's inpatient coders may last 8 weeks because of the variety of codes used. With this in-depth type of coding, facilities can eventually expect coders to produce an average of 24 charts per day.

### TRAINING INPATIENT CODERS

In an inpatient coder training program, students learn specific body system definitions and current coding guidelines that correspond with the ICD-9-CM code books. The student's grasp of the coding guidelines is assessed through coding exercises, practice on actual inpatient charts and competency tests. A comprehensive training program should include instruction on:

- Inpatient coding guidelines for ICD-9-CM diagnosis and procedural coding;
- The process of correct code assignment;
- The correct method for following inpatient coding group edits;
- Accurate assignment of present on admission indicators;
- How to research coding reference material; and
- Understanding how the discharge disposition affects reimbursement.

Discovering that prospective coders already exist on staff and training them through an outsourced program can be an effective and affordable method to improve the HIM department. It's not a temporary solution; it's one that may fuel the system for years to come. ■

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