

# Advancing Your Coding Career

10 tips to help you re-energize your coding career *By Dwan Thomas-Flowers, MBA, RHIA, CCS*

**NEW PROFESSIONALS LOOKING FOR A RICH** coding career track always have questions about getting started. Even seasoned coders often ponder the promotional opportunities that will suit their core skill set. Here are 10 tips to assist aspiring and experienced coders with next steps.

## 1. MARKET YOURSELF

- Research the needs of the organization and services they perform. Brush up on those coding skills.
- Education and training is key. Although experience is desired, many new graduates from accredited HIM programs have already been trained in ICD-10.
- Network at gatherings for professional organizations. If attending virtual events, speak up, ask appropriate questions and show your zeal.
- Follow up on job applications. Don't be discouraged by the first "no." If positions are still open after a period of time, seek feedback from your initial interview to better prepare yourself for the next one.

## 2. ENSURE SUCCESSFUL EXTERNSHIPS/ INTERNSHIPS/VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

- Gain real world exposure by volunteering on weekends or nights with a senior coder. This may be a first step to securing a future coding position.
- Use this experience as a chance to "wow" your preceptor during internships/externships. Be sure to ask for relevant projects, attend meetings, showcase your skills, and ensure your experience is comprehensive by making suggestions for additional activities.
- Begin building your network.
- Inquire about any vacancies that may allow you to showcase what you have learned.

## 3. JOIN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- Some organizations in the field include: American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA); American Academy of Professional Coders (AAPC); Toastmasters; National Association of Health Services Executives (NAHSE); and National Association for Healthcare Quality (NAHQ).
- Surrounding yourself with professionals who may be in the position to assist you. Other membership benefits include lobbying/advocacy, recognition, discounts,

ethical guidance and access to professional development activities.

## 4. PREPARATION AND PERSISTENCE PAYS

- If you are a new graduate, *obtain your credential quickly!* Never hesitate to apply to an open position, know your worth and market your strengths. For example, if documentation is your strength, serve as note taker on a project team, research or update superbills.
- If you are a student, nail your Pharmacology, Terminology, Disease Processes, Coding and A&P courses.
- All coders must ensure your professional resume is immaculate and error free, and emphasize your relevant coursework in the absence of robust experience.

## 5. REMAIN CURRENT

- Be a self-motivator and seek out continuing education opportunities. Maintain your credentials and research up-to-date information, new technologies and emerging trends.

## 6. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ICD-10 TRAINING

- Newly-educated ICD-10 graduates can integrate into the current training plan to assist with vacancy rates.
- Other countries that have implemented a version of ICD-10 have found that the newly-trained professionals' productivity stabilized more rapidly than those having to unlearn ICD-9.
- Newly-educated professionals have a strategic recruitment advantage because healthcare organizations are facing:
  - Current national coding shortage
  - Retiring versus retraining (current workforce) for ICD-10
  - Decreased productivity from ICD-10 increases the need for more coders

## 7. ICD-10 TRAINING TIPS

- Begin with awareness before delving into the chapters and sections by reading literature.
- Download the most recent Official Guidelines for Coding and Reporting. Note that there are separate guidelines for ICD-10-CM and ICD-10-PCS.
- Study Eponyms – these are not used in the ICD-10-PCS classification.
- Review Root Operations and approaches for

ICD-10-PCS.

- Remain committed and stay focused. Schedule time to study and perform self-testing.
- Strengthen Anatomy, Physiology, Pathophysiology and Medical Terminology skills with courses, self-study and online research.

## 8. EXPANDED ROLE

- Consider a closely-related role that may align with your experience. Other roles might include: claims examiners; workers' compensation roles; automobile insurers; health plans; adjudication of claims; and analysis of data.

## 9. CREATE A CODING CAREER PATH

- There are several "types" of coders, including: inpatient; outpatient/hospital clinic; ambulatory or same day surgery; professional services; specialty (GI, interventional radiology, etc.).
- After mastering various types of coding, seek out promotions to related roles.

## 10. OWN IT!

- The most important part of advancing in the world of coding is accountability. Take charge of your own career. If it is really what you want to do, learn all that you can and create your success plan. Exude the following characteristics in all that you do, professionally: detail orientation; quality centricity; self-directed worker; astute internet researcher; excellence in guidelines interpretation; investigative nature; and professionalism.

Use these tips to help you re-energize your coding career or search! It is a competitive field, but your goal is attainable.

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