

How to Find the Right Job in Health Information Management

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Health care is one of America's fastest-growing industries, and therefore the industry generates a vast amount of documentation and records. The field of health information management (HIM) aims to manage all of this information so that the country's complex medical system can run smoothly. HIM provides many diverse job opportunities, including jobs you can get with a high school diploma, an associate degree, and a bachelor's degree. These are all avenues to work in the health care industry without dealing directly with patient care.

In this article, we'll discuss health information management in depth: what it is, what HIM professionals do, the skills and educational requirements to perform these jobs, and the career possibilities and earning potential.

What Is Health Information Management?

Health information management (HIM) is commonly described as the practice of acquiring, analyzing, and protecting digital and traditional medical information vital to providing quality patient care. It's a series of systems that combines business, science, and information technology and is critical to all health care entities.

Having trained HIM professionals working in an organization ensures that information is available when and where someone needs it, but that it will also be kept safe and secure by adhering to legal, ethical, and privacy regulations.

Any physician's office, hospital, or other medical organization needs to make sure every aspect of a patient's experience runs smoothly, from making an appointment to the visit through the insurance claim. The HIM professional's job is to interact with physicians, patients, and insurance companies to ensure a patient's health information is complete, accurate, and protected.

Many HIM jobs are in physician offices, hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies, mental health facilities, public health agencies, and other health-related organizations. The professionals operate in bridge roles to connect operational, clinical, and administrative functions and often interact with other department leaders to create systems that work for everyone.

What Do Health Information Management Professionals Do?

Since the main goal of health information management is to make the patient experience run smoothly, HIM professionals must handle a variety of tasks. Because of the variety of needs, HIM professionals must be highly trained and able to train others to properly handle and use important and private health information. Some jobs in the field include technology, while others consist of generating and analyzing reports from databases made up of clinical, epidemiological, demographic, financial, reference, and coded health care data. The results from those reports can help develop health policy and identify current and future information requirements for their organizations. Data analysts skilled in HIM can play an important role in creating policies and procedures.

The science of health informatics uses health information technology to improve health care by utilizing a variety of methods. It is also important to HIM. This segment applies to the storage, analysis, use, and transmission of information to meet many legal, professional, ethical, and administrative requirements.

Medical coders also play an important role in the field of health information management. According to AAPC, a membership and training association for medical coders, medical coding is the transformation of healthcare diagnosis, procedures, medical services, and equipment into universal medical alphanumeric codes.

Necessary Skills for a Career in Health Information Management

People who work in health information management are highly trained and have a wide range of knowledge. Even though their job doesn't require patient care skills, they must understand the workflow of health care organizations. A basic understanding of human anatomy and physiology can also be helpful.

As technology has expanded in the health care field and as electronic health records (EHRs) are replacing traditional paper records, the role of HIM professionals has also changed. Instead of simply coding and filing charts as medical librarians, they are often responsible for creating the complex systems that handle patient medical records and for standardizing clinical and financial information. Additional tasks may include the following:

- Collecting and analyzing patient data
- Guaranteeing accuracy of patient records
- Ensuring privacy of patient records
- Managing and maintaining databases
- Generating and analyzing reports

The ability to adapt to new technology while understanding the precedents is a critical and valued skill in the field. The tools of the trade are always improving and changing, as are the laws and regulations governing the field.

Types of Records HIM Professionals Handle

Patient Health Record: The documentation of health care services for a single patient. It results directly from an interaction with a patient or people who have personal knowledge of that patient.

Primary Patient Record: Health care professionals use this to record patient data or document observations, actions, or instructions.

Secondary Patient Record: The collection of data from the other health-related records. This information helps a non-clinical person support, evaluate, and advance patient care. It often includes administrative, regulatory, and financial functions.

HIM professionals work with a variety of patient records and information, and they must understand which information is covered by HIPAA (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and other laws.

For an in-depth look at the field of health records management, read [The Importance of Medical Records Management](#).

Branches of Health Information Management: What Is Health Information Technology and Health Informatics?

Health information management is a broad title that refers to the field as a whole. It breaks down further into two main categories: health information technology (HIT) and health informatics (HI).

Health information technology is the more technical side of the field, where people work on the hardware and software for health information management. HIT is the framework used to manage health information in a digital space. Professionals who work in HIT often have information technology (IT) backgrounds and provide support for electronic health records and other systems related to patient and practice management. To learn more about patient management, read [How Patient Management Software Improves the Health Care Experience](#).

Health informatics is the science of how health information is captured, transmitted, and utilized. The practice focuses on how to apply information technology to deliver health care. Using informatics principles, HI is an integrated discipline that includes management science, management engineering principles, health care delivery and public health, patient safety, information science, and computer technology.

4 Major Research Areas of Health Informatics

Role	Who the Role Attracts
Medical/Bio Informatics: Physician- and research-based	Medical students
Nursing Informatics: Clinical- and research-based	Nursing students
Public Health Informatics: Public health- and biosurveillance-based	Public health students
Applied Informatics: Addresses the flow of medical information in an electronic environment and covers process, policy, and technological solutions	HIM students

Source: The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA)

Organizations that Oversee Health Information Management

The field of HIM is highly regulated and changes as technology evolves. The regulations ensure the same standards and policies apply to many areas of health care. Several organizations play a role in maintaining the training and quality of HIM professionals.

The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) is a worldwide organization for HIM professionals with approximately 103,000 members. The organization began in 1928 with the goal of improving the quality of health records.

“We try to continue to look at the trends and we want to make sure our members are ready for the changes,” says Lesley Kadlec, Director of Practice Excellence for AHIMA. “We are always watching for changes in health information management.”

AHIMA also runs the credentialing programs for HIM professionals and offers many kinds of training.

“We are looked at as the leader in providing the staff and resources for success in health information management in the United States,” Kadlec says. “Our advocacy team is watching the regulatory environment and any kinds of changes that are coming that our members

need to know about. They're keeping us up to date at all times."

The Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM) is an independent accrediting organization that sets the standards and requirements for educational programs in HIM.

"Some professionals have gone to a non-CAHIIM accredited program that does not allow them to sit for one of the two main credentialing exams," Kadlec explains. "They need to have the education from a program we approve. We work in partnership with CAHIIM to make sure our candidates have the education, knowledge, and skills. We want to make sure they have the preparation."



Other HIM professional organizations also exist, including the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS), which was founded in 1961 as the Hospital Management Systems Society. Since then, the entity has evolved into a worldwide organization that focuses on improving health through information and technology.

Education and Certificates in Health Information Management

To work in the field of health information management, you usually need either an associate or bachelor's degree. Many colleges and universities have in-person, online, or hybrid programs. However, some jobs, such as a certified medical coder, only require a high school diploma or equivalent and a often certification exam.

The key in pursuing education in the field is to ensure any program is accredited by the CAHIIM, which defines the standards and competencies for academic programs. CAHIIM requires continuing accreditation efforts available through site visits, annual reports, and fees. It works closely with AHIMA on a variety of topics including credentialing, training, and continuing education.

In addition to general education coursework required by specific academic institutions, HIM curriculum often includes classes in biomedical sciences, legal aspects of health information, coding and management of clinical data, statistics, data analysis, database management, quality improvement methods, and computer technology applied to health information systems.

After graduating with a degree, most people who want to work in HIM choose to take one of AHIMA's two certification exams, the Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT) or Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA). In addition to associate and

bachelor's degrees, there are some master's degree programs, often in health information management or health informatics. Some students choose to get an MBA.

Kadlec says having a certification shows a higher level of skill over someone who is not certified. But there are also maintenance requirements to maintain the certification. AHIMA offers many trainings and updates to members and people who have passed their certification exams. "To be effective in your role, you have to evolve," Kadlec adds. "Without an affiliation with an association to help you do that, you're on your own."

RHIT requires the completion of at least an associate degree in a HIM program accredited by CAHIIM or a foreign program approved by a foreign association that has a reciprocity agreement with AHIMA.

AHIMA says most RHITs work in hospitals, but can also work in other health care settings that use patient data or health information.

What People Who Pass the RHIT Certification Can Do:

Ensure the quality of medical records by verifying their completeness, accuracy, and proper entry into computer systems.

Use computer applications to assemble and analyze patient data for the purpose of improving patient care or controlling costs.

Often specialize in coding diagnoses and procedures in patient records for reimbursement and research.

Source: The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA)

The RHIA exam is only for people who have earned at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited program in HIM or a foreign program approved by a foreign association that has a reciprocity agreement with AHIMA. People with RHIA certification work in a variety of settings, including hospitals, specialty clinics, physician practices, long-term care, mental health, and other ambulatory care settings. They are often managers and interact with all levels of an organization that use patient data. Often these individuals are a link between care providers, payers, and patients.

Skills of People with an RHIA

They are an expert in managing patient health information and medical records, collecting and analyzing patient data, and using classification systems and medical terminologies. They also act as administrators of computer information systems.

They possess comprehensive knowledge of medical, administrative, ethical, and legal requirements and standards related to healthcare delivery and the privacy of protected patient information.

They manage people and operational units, participate in administrative committees, and prepare budgets.

They interact with all levels of an organization — clinical, financial, administrative, and information systems — that employ patient data in decision-making and everyday operations.

Source: The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA)

In addition to the RHIA and RHIT, AHIMA offers 10 different certifications including coding, data analysis, privacy and security, technology, and informatics. “There are many certifications that demonstrate you have the proficiency to be successful in those roles,” says Kadlec.

AHIMA requires continuing education and periodic recertification. There are also speciality certifications in data analysis, documentation improvement, medical coding, health informatics, health care technology, and privacy. Testing happens at various sites around the United States throughout the year. Once a candidate registers and pays the testing fee, he or she will receive an authorization to test letter.

“I think the best way to prepare is to take some formal exam prep,” Kadlec advises. But she adds that there is another way: “Experience counts. One of the best ways to prepare for a career in health information management is to get some experience.” A combination of studying and on-the-job training is best, she says.

Other professional organizations, like the American Society of Health Informatics Managers (ASHIM), also offer some certifications for people working in the health information technology field.

“There are a number of other organizations that credential,” Kadlec says. “We do consider ourselves to be the most vigorous and most respected.”

But not everyone takes the RHIA or RHIT tests. Kadlec explains, “There are plenty of people with a bachelor’s in health information management who want to go into other things. What you want to do sort of drives the certifications you should [obtain].”

What Can You Do with a Degree in Health Information Management?

The field of health information management is growing rapidly and there are many opportunities for advancement. For example, a medical records technician was ranked the 13th best job in the Best Health Care Support Jobs of 2015 by U.S. News & World Report.

Many HIM jobs require a 40-hour workweek and take place in a variety of organizations like hospitals, physician offices, medical practices, nursing homes, home health agencies, mental health facilities, and public health agencies.

Types of Health Information Management Jobs and Workplaces

Managing a medical records department	Government agencies
Cancer registry	Law firms
Coding	Insurance companies
Trauma registry	Correctional facilities
Transcription	Extended care facilities
Quality improvement	Pharmaceutical research
Release of information	Information technology and medical software companies
Patient admissions	Accounting firms
Compliance auditor	Insurance companies
Physician accreditation	Information systems vendors
Utilization review	Pharmaceutical research companies
Physician offices	Home health care agencies
Risk management	Ambulatory care providers
Consulting firms	Medical software development
Hospice management	Lobbyists for physician associations
Prison medical recordkeeping for inmates	Non-profit organizations
Health care educator	

Each type of job has a different focus. For example, IT and infrastructure professionals mainly concentrate on software and recordkeeping management, training, and reporting, as well as the design, development, and maintenance of software. Revenue cycle managers oversee all of a patient's involvement with a health care organization. Compliance managers are responsible for coding, following privacy and legal guidelines, and accreditation requirements for staff and facilities. There are many more job types, each with unique responsibilities.

Entry Level Jobs (with Bachelor's Degree and RHIA)

Job Title	Job Description
HIM Director	Assist the HIM Department Director in daily duties and special projects. May include supervision of other department employees.
Health Information Specialist or Technician	Verify patient records are complete and accurate. Compile and analyze patient data to help improve patient care and cost structures. Provide documentation for legal actions or research studies.
Patient Information Coordinator	Help people manage their health information (such as health history, release of health information), and understand their healthcare provider options.
HIM Project Manager	Coordinate, implement and supervise projects related to the management of patient data. Example of projects include transitioning from paper to electronic filing, changing HIM software, compiling and analyzing patient data for a clinical trial.
Consultant	Assist facilities with their HIM needs on a contract or temporary basis. The consultant may be self-employed or work for an HIM consulting agency. Smaller organizations may hire a consultant for basic/general HIM help, while larger organizations may require help to complete a special project or beat a deadline.
Clinical Data Analyst or Specialist	Perform data management or analyst functions in one or many areas such as medical coding, database research, and specialty registries.
Research and Decision Support Analyst	Gather data to assist executive management in decision making. Position includes research on products, regulations, policies, pricing, and legal cases.

Source: Southern New Hampshire University

Jobs for Someone with HIM Experience and a Bachelor's Degree

Job Title	Job Description
HIM Department Director	Manage all operations and personnel in the HIM department. Work with executive management from various departments to provide efficient and secure access to quality patient data. This position may also be called Health Information Administrator or Manager.
HIM Systems Manager	Guide, direct, and monitor the day to day operations of patient medical records. Job includes retrieval, assembly, delivery, abstracting/analyzing, coding, completion, transcriptions, release of information, and vital statistics registration. Assist with project planning, implementation, testing, and maintenance of HIM applications. Oversee the auditing and correction of database errors as it relates to coding and abstracting.
Data Quality Manager	<p>Provide continuous quality improvement (CQI) for information integrity through policy development, information audits, and quality monitoring.</p> <p>For an in-depth look at CQI, read Where Data Serves People: Benefits of the Continuous Quality Improvement Approach</p>
Information Security Officer	Manage the security of all electronic data. Examples of duties include assigning user security levels, auditing security performance, and complying with security regulations and policies.
Privacy Officer	Provide guidance, training, monitoring, and evaluation for the employer's privacy program to maintain privacy assurance and protect health care information in compliance with federal and state laws and the organization's information privacy practices.
Compliance Officer	Create and/or maintain a compliance program. Ensure development and implementation of auditing/monitoring programs to measure performance against compliance obligations. Identify issues that may pose compliance risk.
Regional HIM Director	Oversee HIM managers and operations for a particular geographic region to ensure quality and accuracy of performance throughout an organization.

Source: Southern New Hampshire University

There are also many jobs in medical coding, a field that requires only a high-school diploma or equivalent. Medical coders work with physicians, insurance companies, and other medical professionals to translate diagnoses, procedures, medical services, and more into universal alphanumeric codes. Coders must understand how to read physician's notes, lab reports, and other results and apply codes correctly. Those codes often go into creating claims for insurance companies to pay.

“We see health information management as touching all parts of the health record,” Kadlec says. “What coding professionals do is used in much more than claims. They are responsible for so many things other than just getting the bill out.”

How Much Do You Make in Health Information Management?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a medical record or health information technician had a median salary of \$38,040 in May 2016 with a faster-than-average job growth outlook of 13 percent from 2016 to 2026. The growth is expected to continue as the population ages and there is more demand for additional services in the medical field.

According to ExploreHealthCareers.org, a collaborative site between health care professionals and health care organizations, an HIM professional makes between \$20,000 and \$75,000 annually. That's a wide range, and it's clear that getting some experience and education in the field can make a difference in salary. Entry-level workers with associate degrees earn about \$20,000 to \$30,000, those with bachelor's degrees earn between \$30,000 and \$50,000, and managers with a few years of experience can make between \$50,000 to \$75,000.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides data broken down by the industries with the highest concentration of employment in the occupation, the top paying industries, and geographic region. AHIMA also provides a career map to take you through the various careers in health information management. There is also information about the various career options and updated salary study results, job data, and self-assessments.

Is Health Information Management the Right Career for You?

Many people want to work in the growing field of health care, but do not want to directly take care of patients. Health information management might be ideal for those people, and for those with a knowledge or interest in human anatomy and physiology. The field is also good for people who are interested both in health care and in technology, as many careers within HIM, especially health information technology, combine the two.

If the goal is a 40-hour work week, HIM might be the perfect fit. Pursuing jobs in HIM is also a good choice for people who value accuracy, organization, and adherence to rules and regulations, since health information is highly regulated and is concerned with medical, legal, ethical, and privacy standards.

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