Coder, Abstract Thyself! 5 Tips on Data Mining Your Experience for the Job Search

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Too often people think only in terms of job titles when they search for a job — if they don't have the exact experience for which they are applying, they don't try. Let me suggest an alternative approach. I suggest you "abstract" your prior work history for applicable skills the same way you would abstract a medical record for information to code.

Let me show you what I mean:

The patient's esophageal varices had blown and he was hemorrhaging. He was clearing our shelves of blood products. I had the OR on the phone in one ear, the local blood bank on another phone in the other ear. I got the approval for "immediate spin" type-and-cross from the surgeon. The valiant efforts of more than a dozen people kept this man alive…

I stared at the screen. The computer system was a mishmash of half-written data base indices, broken interfaces, unsearchable text fields, with implementation languishing months overdue. I created the needed indices, streamlined interfaces, and road herd on the vendor to keep the project moving along to save on maintenance fees. Three months later we did a soft go-live — and I brought the implementation in for $40,000 under budget…

I was on the phone with the public relations director of a hospital in Gulfport, Miss., covering a story after Hurricane Katrina. The connection was spotty. At one point, she just stopped. In her gentle Southern accent, she said, "Cindy, I have no shoes. They're all gone." We wept together…

These examples aren't about me; although I went through each of these situations, they are examples of how to look at yourself. Maybe you're asking what any of these scenarios have to do with HIM careers. Plenty! Experience in high-pressure situations, project management skills, clinical experience, and treating others with compassion — just to name a few. I'm sure you have similar experiences.

Looking at your work and relevant personal experience with a different perspective might reveal skills you didn't realize you had. Find what makes you unique among all the other applicants. Just as you would abstract a medical record, hunting for those nuggets of information leading to codable diagnoses and procedures, use those same techniques to search your own background for job skills.

Here are five considerations:

1. Consider all your work history — I haven't practiced medical technology in years, but the knowledge base provided me a rock-solid foundation for an HIM career. Maybe you were a bank teller in a past life. Don't you think basic accounting experience is meaningful in an HIM position that interacts with financial departments? I sure do.

2. Think skills, not titles — Newspaper reporting is about as far from the HIM department as you can get. Or is it? I handled a myriad of small projects (aka news stories) simultaneously, kept organized (under deadlines), and provided an error-free deliverable (a business newspaper). Look at your past jobs. Cover up the title, forget the canned job description. Were you a receptionist? You interacted with clients, handled phone calls, and set schedules — all skills needed in HIM departments.

3. Free time isn't just "me time" — Take a closer look at your volunteer positions, weekend odd jobs, even hobbies. I raised several thousand dollars in sponsorship sales for a chamber of commerce golf tournament. Translation — sales skills, budgeting, even rapport-building. Have you served on a campaign committee for a nonprofit at which you volunteer? To me, that sounds like project management, goal-setting, public relations, even advertising to raise those funds — solid business talents needed in just about any job.

4. A little may be a lot — Don't be discouraged if your work history is a little sparse. If you're a new grad, consider school projects as well as your professional practicum. Maybe you took time off for family. You managed budgets, coordinated schedules, and took care of crises large and small. Both of these situations are extraordinarily relevant in HIM. I took some time off to write my first novel — I translate this as written communications, time management, and goal-achievement. You need to explain employment gaps anyway, so why not mine them for pertinent experiences?

5. Everything's relevant, unless it's not — The hardest consideration is deciding which jobs and skills make sense to include and which do not. There really is no easy answer for this. I manage social media for an online education company. Sometimes this makes sense to include, other times not. If you can make a serious business case for your days as a carnival barker, go for

it. You learned presentation skills, people skills, even salesmanship, all good. Bilking people out of money with soft extortion practices — I'd leave that off.

Look at your professional narrative with fresh eyes. You just might impress an employer — as well as yourself!

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