Health IT Entry Certification: A Rapid-Growth Industry Beckons New Talent

Background

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act incentives drove healthcare providers to adopt electronic patient record software systems. The resulting demand for IT professionals in healthcare was rapid and has continued to increase, illuminating the lack of a coherent entry sequence for job seekers in the field. Due to the unique, stringent patient security requirements and the singular nature of information technology at the point of patient wellness and care activities, health IT has emerged as a discrete domain in education. Graduate programs in healthcare informatics have proliferated in the past decade. Employers are calling on community colleges to infuse allied health and nursing curricula with information technology content, as well as to produce educational offerings that provide new and necessary skills for incumbent workers. Community college IT instructors who teach in areas such as database management, network security, and data analytics are in need of healthcare-specific content. In addition, career awareness is nonexistent for this high-demand, high-wage sector, which lacks the navigational aids for job seekers commonly found in a more mature field.

Recognizing the need for certification in the burgeoning area of information technology in healthcare, the National Science Foundation recently supported the development of a credential geared towards entry-level learners. In partnership with the largest professional association in the sector— the Health Information Management and Systems Society (HIMSS)— the Certified Associate in Health Information & Management Systems (CAHIMS) certificate was created, along with a preparatory curriculum. Dozens of health IT practitioners contributed to the surveys, job analysis, item writing, and item review.

Documented Results

Within nine months of launch, as of March 2014, nearly 300 candidates have taken the CAHIMS examination, with a pass rate of 73%. Eleven colleges have adopted the preparatory curriculum, or are in the process of doing so. Some of these institutions are embedding CAHIMS curriculum into existing health or IT certificate and degree programs; others are offering the course as a standalone to prepare for test taking.

The CAHIMS curriculum has been incorporated into the Federally Registered Health IT Specialist Apprenticeship as an interim credential, which will be inaugurated within 2014. CAHIMS was also selected for suitability for military personnel with an IT or medic background who wish to enter the health IT field when transitioning to civilian life. An example of this implementation is the Camo to Commerce program funded by the Department of Labor (2014).

A collaboration with the YOUR Center, a faith-based organization in Flint, Michigan, resulted in a roll-out plan for health IT career awareness and action for underserved youth and their families, a landmark of which is the attainment of the CAHIMS certification.

The Carnegie Mellon Open Learning Institute selected the CAHIMS curriculum for redevelopment into a metrics-driven, interactive online format, to be hosted on their learning platform. This freely available, self-paced preparatory course will be completed in September

2014. A free, downloadable version of the CAHIMS curriculum is currently accessible at www.nterlearning.org.

Potential Applications

Industry: The Certified Associate in Health Information & Management Systems credential is intended as a first step into professional life, and onto the path of the only other HIMSS certification—the Certified Professional in Health Information & Management Systems—which requires five years of practice and a bachelor's degree. CAHIMS was piloted in the University of Mississippi Medical Center system, in part, to assist administrators in gauging incumbent workers' skills and skills gaps. This application can assist those already on the job to demonstrate mastery in pursuit of job and wage progression. Early acceptance by employers indicates receptivity for the entry-level industry certification, which can signal a job applicant's investment and intentions in the field of health IT.

Higher Education: Members of a nine-college consortium, funded by the Department of Labor, developed a Common IT Core Curriculum, keyed to pair with the CAHIMS curriculum. The consortium's goal was to define a base for learners to test the waters of a health IT career pathway. Elements of the Microsoft Certified Associate curriculum were used for the Common IT Core Curriculum. Developers noted that the utility for this dual-faceted program included beneficial exposure to healthcare content for IT instructors in a nonthreatening format.

Individual CAHIMS curriculum elements may be infused into a wide range of nursing and allied health programs. Many community college learners in these fields find themselves unprepared for clinical experience and employment due to unfamiliarity with information systems now ubiquitous in healthcare settings. At the same time, nursing and allied health instructors typically do not have historic ties to data science departments on their campus, and may lack interest or aptitude for professional development in this area. Incorporating elements of the CAHIMS curriculum into their courses is a low investment with the potential to add industry relevance and exposure for learners.

Secondary Education: High school students aspiring to a career in information technology can benefit from exposure to elements of the CAHIMS curriculum, and be on the path to certification before graduation. Although employment and wage projections are significant in this field at least through the next 10 years, health IT is not a well-known field. Underserved learners may well benefit from introduction to a sector that appears far afield of their surroundings.

More Information
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