Effective Training:
Keys to Improving Clinical Documentation and Financial Performance
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Nearly nine out of ten senior healthcare finance executives say improving the accuracy of clinical documentation is the greatest area of opportunity for improving financial performance. More than half the respondents from the same survey by the Healthcare Finance Management Association (HFMA) identified inadequate physician and clinician education as a barrier to improved clinical documentation.

Lack of appropriately trained staff can significantly impact the revenue cycle of an organization. This is especially true in today's environment of evolving payment models that demand greater levels of detail and involve increased regulatory scrutiny. Compliance failures can result in devastating paybacks and penalties.

Given the substantial financial implications at stake, why does training so often take a back seat when it comes to Clinical Documentation Improvement (CDI) efforts? There are several barriers to effective documentation and coding training, however, forward thinking organizations understand the need to address and overcome them.
How to Know When You Need an Independent Expert to Be Successful

The healthcare industry is continuously changing so there is always a need for training to stay abreast of all the coding and documentation requirements. This demand is particularly acute as organizations adapt to the transition to ICD-10. With a four-fold increase in codes and expansion into granular levels of detail in this new standard, ensuring that staff are completely up to speed has become imperative. Many organizations have provided training to prepare for the change, but now that ICD-10 is up and running, there is an ongoing need for remedial training.

In addition, the increased level of scrutiny from a growing number of regulatory bodies has meant a greater number of both internal and external audits. These audits often provide a wealth of training opportunities – especially when the results are less than ideal. Many organizations find audits uncover a lack of training that must be addressed.

The Impact of Insufficient Training
Many organizations do not adequately invest in their training programs. That can be the case when senior leadership fails to grasp the operational and financial impact poor training can have in the coding and documentation area. Insufficient training can cause an increase in denials, incorrect or missed billings, and issues with reimbursements, all of which negatively impact the revenue cycle and puts the organization at greater risk for non-compliance.
Barriers to Effective Training

There are several reasons institutions don’t have adequate training programs in place:

**Lack of Budget:** Many organizations, especially smaller organizations and physician practices, struggle with budget constraints. This makes it difficult to maintain a structured training program because when mandatory layoffs occur, training teams are often among the first to be cut. With reduced staff, many organizations lack experienced employees to conduct effective training.

**Lack of Qualified Trainers:** In some cases, entire departments are eliminated due to budget cuts and leave the burden of training to supervisors or peers. They in turn may rely on super users and the exchange of “bare bones training” but as any trainer will admit, that doesn’t result in thorough knowledge transfer.

**Lack of Time:** When resources are stretched thin, it’s often difficult to free up existing staff members to conduct training sessions because they have taken on a greater number of tasks to make up for the loss of support. New employees are then forced to pick up the material “on the fly” from their environment or attend “make up” sessions. The end result is that staff members do not receive proper or consistent training.
Before you design and implement your training program, it's important to establish a skills baseline to determine how well your team understands the coding and documentation process. Individuals in entry-level positions often have varying levels of experience. Evaluate your staff’s knowledge of codes and coding terminology and make sure it is well defined and featured in your training documentation. Understanding the level of staff expertise will help guide you when building your training program.

**Define the Training Scope**

Your training program should focus on a number of key areas. First, break it down into two groups: general training and job-specific training. During the generalized training, cover key compliance issues and ethical decision-making. After that you can move onto job-specific training that includes detailed tasks and interoperability. There are various training methods you can use including lectures, emails, computer-based training, or one-on-one instruction.
Once your staff learns the basics, you can move on to more advanced techniques that will enhance their productivity. A second round of training three to six months after the initial training is key to reinforcing what they've learned.

Include a follow-up assessment to ensure that your staff has received the appropriate knowledge transfer on both organizational objectives and job role functions. Develop a proficiency checklist that can be beneficial in determining how well your staff has retained the training knowledge. Such a tool can help you and your team identify weaknesses or areas where additional training may be required.

Policies and procedures should be consistent in the effort to continually reassess and reinforce your training program. Monitoring key data points such as claims denial rates, types of denials, and billing accuracy is crucial to optimizing the program. Create an environment of ownership by reinforcing how important each employee is in achieving organizational goals. Make employees accountable for what they are doing and how they can improve to help drive success.
When faced with the obstacles preventing an effective training program, many organizations turn to professional trainers for help. These partners can provide the personnel and expertise to help design and operate your training regimen. This allows you to improve the skill level of your staff without disrupting crucial day-to-day operations.

When evaluating professional trainers consider asking:
• Do they have in-depth, hands on experience in the healthcare industry?
• Can they provide referrals from previous clients?
• Are they able to customize the training program for your particular needs?
• Do they utilize a variety of training methods – classroom, computer-based and online?
• Do they offer flexible training schedules to accommodate users? Will they set up availability for “walk-ins”?
• Do they provide post-training follow up to ensure effectiveness of training?
• Do they have a structured knowledge-transfer process to enable continued training by in-house staff once the engagement is complete?

Driving efficiency and productivity is imperative in this era of increased focus on proper coding and documentation. Having a well-trained, proficient team that knows and follows established processes is crucial to ensuring proper reimbursement and minimizing non-compliance risk.
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