

WHAT'S YOUR FLIGHT PLAN? GETTING THAT FIRST JOB IN CODING

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What's the deal with all these coding job ads that require two or more years of coding experience? How are you suppose to get your first job in coding if the employers are only looking at people who have been in the field? And what is so special about "years of experience" anyway?

Experienced vs. New

To begin with, you need to stop thinking like a student and start thinking like the person doing the hiring. Imagine you are the manager of coding for Pleasant View Hospital. The budget has been approved for the year, and you can only add two new coders this year. Will you risk hiring someone right out of school, or will you hire someone who has been coding for awhile? For you, it's about managing the risk in the hiring decision. If you choose poorly: the hospital will suffer because the charts won't be coded in a timely manner, you'll have to fire the person that isn't working out, and waste even more time starting the interview process again. No wonder we see employers choosing the more conservative route in hiring.

But for many employers it isn't that they aren't willing to consider a recent graduate, it is just that they don't know how to determine if the new grad has credibility as a coder. Does this new grad have the skills to come in on the first day and be productive? Will they be an asset or a liability to my organization?

The value of the "two years work experience" requirement is that it tells the hiring manager that another employer hired you to code and didn't fire you for at least two years; so you must be able to code fairly well.

Coding Log

But there is a different way to establish your coding credibility – by having a coding log. Think of a coding log like a flight log. Every time a student pilot gets into a plane, they log their time, their maneuvers, and their outcomes. Before they can get their pilot's license they will need to be able to demonstrate their proficiency in actually flying a plane (not just passing a written exam) and the flight log is how they do that.

We can borrow this idea from aviation training and use it to help establish credibility for new coders. Initially, you will learn about coding (ICD-9-CM and CPT) in class. While learning you will work through coding scenarios and maybe even a few charts but your efforts will be slow and have errors. But later, as your skills as a coder take shape, you can practice your coding in simulated coding environments either by looking at paper charts or by looking at electronic charts online. As you move to this later phase, you need to begin making entries into your coding log.

Log Entries: Creating the log isn't something you do for a class grade. And, it isn't your teacher's job to keep track of it for you. This is something you do for yourself because you hope one day to get a job as a coder. The log should be a bound notebook in which you will write column headings similar to this:

Date	Chart Type	Chart Count	Coding Time	Accuracy
01/10/06	Inpatient	11	1hr, 13 min	80%
01/28/06	Outpatient	20	1 hr, 2 min	94%

As you code a series of charts, keep track of your outcomes. You'll need to keep track of your start and stop time to be able to enter your coding time. To determine the accuracy rate you will need to know the total number of codes that are accurate, divided by the total number of codes discovered for that coding set.

Formula: What did happen, divided by what could have happened, x100 = accuracy percent

Example: Let's calculate the accuracy rate of the Inpatient Charts in the above table. The student coded eleven inpatient charts for a total of 60 different codes. And 12 of the codes were either in error or missing ($60 - 12 = 48$ accurate) so the formula is:
 $48/60 = 0.8$ ($\times 100$) = 80%

You want to capture Accuracy Rate (not Error Rate) so this is why you have the extra step of subtracting 12 from 60. If you used 12 as your numerator it gets you an error rate, if you use 48 as your numerator you get an accuracy rate. So, do you want to show how much you got right (accuracy) or do you want to show how much you got wrong (error)?

Over time, your log should show your increasing accuracy and speed with coding charts. Ideally, by the time you graduate you will have coded a couple of hundred different types. The coding log becomes part of your hiring portfolio that you will bring to every interview. Be sure to use statistics from your log in your cover letter to potential employers when asking for an interview.

All Systems Go: Take Off! For example, after completing her coding classes and working through her simulations, Nancy has coded 300 charts of varying kinds and kept careful log entries. The log provides detailed statistics about her coding ability and productivity. She includes this on her resume:

Objective: New certified coder with an inpatient coding accuracy rate of 94% (per 13 charts per hour) and outpatient coding accuracy rate of 98% (per 23 charts per hour) seeks employment in a fast paced HIM department.

When Nancy arrives for her interview, she brings the coding log with her and uses it to open a discussion about her practical experience of coding charts. She could also discuss the value added skills she brings to the job as a result of being a recent grad – she has the latest knowledge about electronic record processing, data analysis, and legal case studies that someone who has been away from school for years may not have. The idea is to lower the risk of hiring a new grad, and the coding log is a way to do just that.