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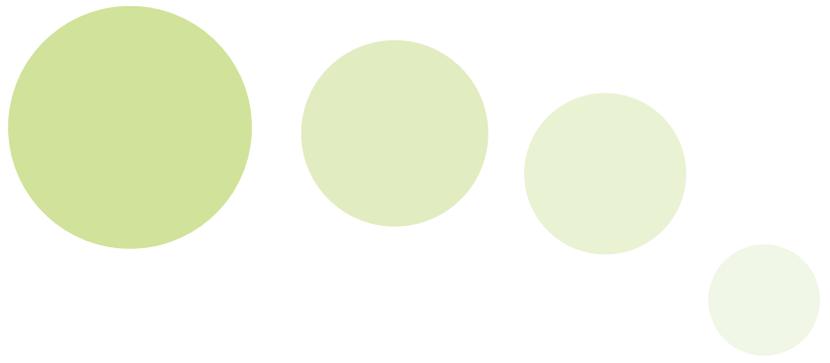
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Labor Pool of **Growth** and **Prosperity**

The logo for the American Hospital & Health Information Association (ahdi). It features the lowercase letters "ahdi" in a dark blue, sans-serif font. Above the letters "h" and "i" are three small, light blue dots arranged in a slight arc.

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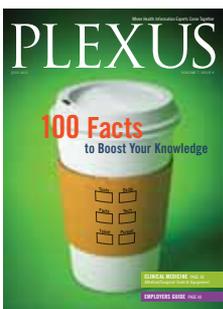
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Expectations and Reality— *A Changing World*

Tara Courtland

How do we make sure education keeps pace with a changing industry? It's certainly not a question that's unique to clinical documentation, but it's being asked with increasing frequency in the field these days.

"It's challenging for companies to keep up with the changes," said Betsy Ertel, CEO of SpeedType and chair of the AHDI Educators Alliance Steering Committee. "Speech recognition, line rates, electronic health records ... when you think about how long it takes changes to filter down from a hospital to a vendor to a teacher and into a school curriculum, you can see why it's hard for students to keep pace."

More and more transcription schools are now using externships as a way of helping their students get up to speed before graduation.

"We were the 'guinea pigs,' so to speak - the first to come on board in 2010," said Paula Goode, a teacher at

Sheridan Technical Center in Florida. "We've put several classes through and after each term, we tweak the process again to get a little closer to perfection."

New England Medical Transcription (NEMT) is currently working with six different schools in its externship program: Sheridan, Seminole State College and Polk Community College, all in Florida; Gateway Community College in Arizona; Med-Line online school and OAK Horizons. Students enter into NEMT's HIPAA testing and set-up process, then they transcribe scrubbed audio files from the doctors they'll be working with after they're hired.

But that's where NEMT's involvement stops. The transcribed reports are sent directly to the teacher, who grades and edits them and works with the students on accuracy and speed.

"It's a good system because it gives the students experience working in a real-world environment but



it takes the burden of one-on-one management off the company,” said NEMT President Linda Allard, CHPS. “One of the reasons internships have been a tough sell in this industry is because it takes so much manpower to work with students.”

The intensive oversight that students and new MTs need is one of the main barriers to getting a foot in the door at a company. There’s a misconception that unpaid interns provide free labor to companies, said Ertel. In reality, the opposite is true. “Brand-new MTs can easily cost the company more than they bring in, just because of the extra help they need in editing and mentoring,” Ertel said. “Interns, even when they’re unpaid, can be even more costly. That’s why the industry has been largely unsuccessful in setting up internships for students.”

Since the externship model doesn’t have that problem, the program has been a success in its first two years. So far, 49 students have been through the NEMT program with 14 currently enrolled.

The students take the same HIPAA course and tests as NEMT personnel and are then approved to begin work. The students transcribe real doctors’ audio files that have been scrubbed of personal identification information, and work on a turnaround time determined by their teachers.

After the six- to eight-week externship is complete,

teachers provide NEMT executives feedback on each student’s performance. Those who did well are recommended by the teachers for paid work at NEMT. If they pass NEMT’s transcription test, they begin several weeks of paid internship work at NEMT before being cleared to transcribe as full professionals.

“We’ve discovered several new things in the last few months,” said Allard. “Most importantly, we’ve realized how important it is that students learn on the audio for the doctors for whom they’ll be transcribing when they come to work.”

That’s the way the program was envisioned, Allard said, but in a couple of cases, the externs graduated, got jobs with NEMT, and were doing so well that they were moved over to different accounts, not the doctors they had trained on. “That [transition] didn’t go as well as we’d have liked,” Allard acknowledged. “But it at least proved our initial assertion: that giving students advance training on a particular doctor’s speech patterns and accent makes all the difference in their success as new transcriptionists.”

There have been a few other stumbling blocks as well. One of the major issues isn’t confined to externs or to NEMT—it’s the problem of student expectations versus reality when it comes to pay.

“This has always been an issue,” said Goode.



“Students have sometimes heard that they could make \$60,000 or more a year doing transcription. They don’t realize how long it takes to get that good.”

Goode said she and her fellow teachers have been working to give their students more reasonable expectations of a starting MT’s take-home pay, but the gap between fantasy and reality is so high, it’s often hard to overcome.

“We’ve had a couple quit a few weeks into the paid program,” said Allard. “An MT’s work has to be essentially perfect but we know it takes years to be both fast and perfect. The newer ones just can’t go fast enough to make the money they’re looking for.”

Line rates also aren’t as high as they used to be anywhere in the industry. It’s no secret that hospitals are paying companies less per line than they did even a few years ago. As a result, MTs don’t make as much per line either.

“It’s just how things have played out in the economy,” Ertel said. “We believe things will bounce back, but regardless, we adapt to the changing circumstances.”

The best way an individual worker can adapt is to cross-train for newer technology and, for transcriptionists, that means learning voice recognition technology.

That’s traditionally been a challenge for experienced MTs because the system infrastructure and process is different; for instance, transcriptionists use a foot pedal, while voice recognition editors use a mouse to



click through.

“Students have an advantage there, because they don’t have to unlearn 20 years of habit,” said Seminole teacher Susan Dooley. “They just learn the new system from the start and they have the potential to progress much more quickly than traditional transcriptionists who are retraining.”

Industry studies have shown that the MTs who benefit most in productivity gains from speech recognition editing are those with less experience and speed in transcription.

But while everyone agrees that voice recognition editing is an important skill for students and new MTs, the actual training has been cost-prohibitive. Unlike traditional transcription, voice recognition platforms are paid by the minute. That means students and interns can’t just listen and edit for free—someone has to pay the company that’s providing the audio and that has put a real damper on teachers’ ability to get real-world experience in voice recognition.

That’s all about to change, however, because ChartNet Technologies has agreed to work with NEMT to provide voice recognition practice to externs.

“We’re incredibly grateful to ChartNet for stepping up to help train these up-and-coming voice rec editors,” Allard said. “Without the support of companies like

ChartNet, schools and MTSOs wouldn't be able to give students actual relevant experience with voice recognition. Our ability to offer that training now is going to be a huge benefit to the future workforce, not just for NEMT, but for the entire industry."

The voice recognition training program is expected to be ready by early summer and OAK Horizons owner Kathy Martin said she expects it to be a huge leap forward in clinical documentation education.

"This is huge," she said. "Getting our students real experience on voice rec is the single biggest step anyone could have taken to preparing them for a changing industry."

While ChartNet executives are launching that initiative with NEMT administrators, Allard's next project is to work directly with students on their professional skills. Though she's been a national speaker on that topic for several years, she has yet to teach the subject in a classroom setting. Recently, however, the extern teachers asked for Skype presentations to their students, to help explain the ins and outs of professionalism in a work-from-home job.

"This is a regular thing in work-from-home jobs," Allard said. "Any HR manager could tell you stories about angry phone calls they get from prospective workers, wanting to know why they haven't gotten a callback yet, or about the unprofessional email addresses they see on applications. It's something every supervisor in a remote job environment sees on a weekly basis."

While this "work-from-home casualness" isn't

limited to new MTs, they're more likely to suffer the ill effects of it since they're actively trying to get a job without experience. In her sessions, Allard plans to talk directly with the students about everything from professional email communication to scheduling expectations. "That's another thing we need to impart to them," Goode said. "Clinical documentation generally has a flexible schedule but that doesn't mean they can choose to work only Mondays, Wednesdays, and every other Thursday afternoon from 2 to 4. We need them to hear straight from the companies that they're going to be expected to pick up a regular schedule and stick to it."

There is no doubt that opportunities abound in this field in the coming years; however, we must all take the time and effort to educate and be educated in order to position ourselves as the documentation experts the medical community needs right now and into the future. If you're interested in these kinds of issues, either from the perspective of a teacher in the field or a student, you can hear more about them in detail at the student and educator summits during AHDI's Annual Convention & Expo (ACE 2013) July 31-Aug. 3. **P**

Tara Courtland is the communications director at New England Medical Transcription (NEMT).

