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Navigating a successful career in healthcare compliance

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The healthcare compliance industry has grown significantly over the past 25 years. This growth has created an exciting array of career opportunities for those interested in this niche of the healthcare industry. This article offers ideas and insights for navigating your career in healthcare compliance. From a historical perspective, the healthcare compliance industry, as we know it today, was born in the mid-1990s along with the Health Care Compliance Association (HCCA). Membership has climbed over the years proportionate to the number of people in the profession, with almost 12,000 members today. As the government continues to add, change, and enforce laws, there will always be a need for compliance programs and compliance professionals.

With the evolutionary maturity of compliance programs has come the addition of support roles like compliance managers, coordinators, specialists, analysts, auditors, etc. In the early 2000s, the HIPAA rules became effective, and many in the compliance profession assumed the role of the privacy officer. Likewise, the industry expanded over time with privacy specialists, analysts, auditors, etc. This trend has provided a career progression path to follow in the compliance profession.

Outlining a career path in healthcare compliance

There is an old maxim that says, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” If you haven’t already done so, map out your career plan. Routinely review and adjust your plan as your career progresses. You may not be able to predict what the future will bring, but having a plan can point you in the right direction and save time in accomplishing your professional goals. Below are some things to consider when mapping out your plan.

Determining fit

The first question to ask when outlining a career path in compliance is determining whether the healthcare compliance profession is the right fit for you. Many prospective compliance professionals are attracted to the profession because they enjoy reading and interpreting the law and helping organizations implement those laws. There are dynamics that go much deeper than simply applying legal requirements that can make the position challenging that are important to understand before you embark on a career in compliance.

Understanding your work style, preferences, strengths, and skills is important to determine whether you’re a good fit for the compliance role. For example, if you’re interested in a role that has a high degree of consistency and predictability to it, the compliance role may not be an optimal fit as the compliance officer works in a highly dynamic environment with a constant need to reprioritize.

Alternatively, if you like to constantly learn new things and get involved in many areas of the organization in a never-ending array of disparate activities, you might be a good fit for healthcare compliance. Understanding the

dynamics of the compliance profession is important to understand whether the role is right for you.

Finding the right niche

This speaks to the proverbial question of “What do you want to be when you grow up?” One of the essential questions is what specific role do you want to be in. Although the chief compliance officer may seem enticing, there are many other roles that are equally rewarding. These might include compliance education, auditing and monitoring, investigations, privacy or security, clinical research, etc. There are also some very compelling sister roles to compliance like risk management, quality, accreditation, legal, or internal audit.

Finding the right industry

What aspect of the industry would you like to work in? If we limit our considerations to the healthcare industry, this might include hospitals, health plans, home health and hospice agencies, physician groups, durable medical equipment or device companies, the pharmaceutical industry, etc. There are many niches within the healthcare industry where compliance plays a role, and you’ll want to decide which niche you’d like to pursue. This decision might be made for you as future opportunities become available that are of interest.

Finding your preferred geographic location

This may represent one of the most important factors to consider when mapping your compliance career. Is there a specific geographic location you’d like to work in? It’s important to consider the availability of the compliance profession in the geographic location of your choice. If your desire is to remain in the small town you grew up in, your options for compliance positions may be limited. If, however, you choose to work in a large metropolitan area, your career options expand considerably. Having said that, working in a small town may be the right choice for you. In some cases, people are limited in their geographic options due to personal factors.

The best way to move up quickly in your career progression is, of course, to be willing and able to relocate to where the next best job is. If you choose to stay in a specific geographic location, you may be qualified for the chief compliance officer position but end up waiting years for that golden opportunity only to discover that someone from outside your area was offered the position and the waiting game begins again. This isn’t to dissuade you from desiring a specific location or organization; just be aware of those constraints and limitations.

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