How a former respiratory therapist breathes compliance into healthcare operations

an interview with Kimberly Kellar Kirk
Compliance Coordinator, Fairfield Medical Center

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What better determines success: Professional qualifications or personal characteristics?

» The need for skilled and qualified compliance professionals is rising.
» Qualifications for compliance professionals include a minimum level of education, years of experience, and certification.
» Characteristics are often inherent to an individual’s personality.
» Characteristics of a compliance professional include integrity, curiosity, approachability, a non-judgmental mindset, a knack for organization, and the ability to fit into the entity’s culture.
» Qualifications and personal characteristics should be considered when staffing a Compliance department or considering a career in Compliance.

The Office of Inspector General (OIG), Health and Human Services (HHS) advises that the Compliance department should be led by a “well-qualified compliance officer.” What constitutes “well-qualified”? Most positions within the Compliance profession require a Bachelor’s degree, with an advanced degree preferred. What makes the Compliance profession, and the individuals who belong to it, so interesting are the multiple career paths leading to Compliance. Attorneys, nurses, accountants, and others with and without healthcare experience make up the profession. This diversity leads to multiple unique perspectives at the table.

Although the level of education required is fairly consistent, the content of that education varies. Is there an “ideal” degree or background for a compliance professional? A law degree is certainly viewed as desirable; however, clinical experience may also be beneficial. Many nurses with law degrees find their ways to the Compliance world. However, an individual with a background in Health Information may have extensive understanding of privacy regulations, making him/her a valuable asset to the Compliance department. Then there are the individuals with degrees in Health Administration or Business Administration, who also have a great deal of expertise and insight to offer to the Compliance profession.

Qualifications
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Experience is an important qualification, even compensating for a lower level of education. The Compliance profession is still relatively new, with fewer experienced individuals seeking positions. Those who do have experience in Compliance have an advantage. As the profession matures, years of experience will be a greater factor in evaluating candidates.

Certification is an excellent method of proving an individual's knowledge and expertise in his/her chosen profession. Pertinent certifications to the Compliance profession include Certified in Healthcare Compliance (CHC), Certified Compliance and Ethics Professional (CCEP), and other specialized areas. The process of certification is in itself a learning experience that offers opportunity for professional growth.

The qualifications for compliance professionals are certainly not set in stone and may vary from organization to organization, depending on the circumstances. For example, if the Compliance department is composed entirely of attorneys, filling an open position with an accountant or a nurse may be a wise decision.

**Characteristics**

What does it take to succeed in the Compliance profession? Qualifications are vital and necessary to secure a position, but careful consideration should be given to the personal characteristics of the compliance professional. Qualifications can be obtained, but some characteristics are inherently part of an individual's personality. An organization may be able to provide training and education for a less-qualified candidate; however, a qualified candidate lacking the necessary characteristics will have a more difficult road to success.

The compliance professional must first and foremost be of high integrity. In order to earn the trust of the board, compliance committees, executives, and staff, the individual's behavior should prove that he/she truly believes in "doing the right thing," with an emphasis on "doing." Seemingly minor infractions, such as a compliance officer parking in a designated patient lot, can seriously hinder the professional's effectiveness. The compliance professional should be a person who consistently sets an example of integrity and trustworthiness in the organization.

The compliance professional should possess an innate curiosity and desire for life-long learning. Understanding new regulations, researching existing laws and regulations to answer inquiries, and networking with peers to assist each other in these activities are all a part of the compliance professional's work. The compliance professional should be willing to seek opportunities for learning and professional growth.

The compliance professional must be approachable and non-judgmental. The effectiveness of the compliance program hinges on staff willingness to report. When receiving a report, the compliance professional should simply gather facts without passing judgment, understanding that the first report rarely tells the entire story. An open line of communication is crucial to the fact-gathering process. This approachability must also be balanced...
with an appropriate level of assertiveness and the ability to stand up for what is right.

The compliance professional must be discreet and exhibit sound judgment when handling sensitive situations. Information received may be damaging to the organization and/or individuals within the organization. “Loose lips” not only sink ships — they can also sink a compliance career.

The compliance professional must have good organizational skills and the ability to investigate multiple issues simultaneously. Government audits, overpayment refunds, and responses to complaints are all time sensitive with external deadlines. Furthermore, many compliance professionals wear more than one hat and must juggle multiple duties.

The compliance professional must be able to fit well into the entity’s culture. The compliance officer must be viewed as a leader and be confident reporting to the board and executives. Compliance professionals should be able to foster good working relationships with key departments, such as Coding, Billing, Internal Audit, and clinical areas. The successful compliance professional is one who is able to play a key role in the development of a “culture of compliance.”

**Conclusion**

Qualifications must certainly be considered when staffing a Compliance department or considering a career in Compliance, but personal characteristics are at least as important, if not more so. Compliance departments under development or expansion should consider these qualifications and characteristics when evaluating candidates for employment. Individuals seeking a career in Compliance should examine themselves to determine if they are qualified and if they exhibit the right characteristics for this profession.®

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3. Id.