

▶ **CASE STUDY:** Tahoe Forest Health System,
Remote Coding with CodeRunner™

Tahoe Forest Health System

- Multi-location health system in resort community

The Situation

- Not enough qualified local coders to meet needs
- On-site outsourced coders too expensive
- Seasonal spikes in utilization

The Solution

- MedQuist CodeRunner technology and services

The Result

- Hospital coders work from home
- Coders are more productive
- MedQuist coders work remotely to cover for vacations, holidays and backup coverage

The Benefits

- Coding turnaround time improved
- Reduced outsourced coding travel expense
- Improved employee recruiting, retention and morale
- Reduced Discharged Not Final Billed (DNFB)

CodeRunner Solves Seasonality Spikes and Recruiting Issues

Debra McGaskey, RHIT, CCS, Director, Health Information Management, was faced with what has become an epidemic problem: the shortage of professional coders. Her problem was exacerbated by the fact that Tahoe Forest is located in a mountainous, resort area that brings two major seasonal spikes in health system access. With a full staff, she only had three clinical coders. Holidays, vacations, sick time and vacancies caused major productivity decreases, coding backlogs and subsequent increases in discharged-not-final-billed (DNFB) days. McGaskey spent her time chasing down coders instead of managing health information.

The cost of living is high in Truckee, California, on the banks of Lake Tahoe. This makes it difficult to attract trained and qualified coders. Also, the organization spent a lot of time and money on advertising fees, professional search firms, and marketing to find the coders they needed. Even when they found someone, the relocation fees were almost cost-prohibitive.

The organization had historically relied on outsourced coders to meet their needs. But outsourcing always involved expensive contract coder fees. And while these costs were high, it was the associated travel expense that created the major problem. Thus, McGaskey began investigating remote coding options. She called around to find out how other resort hospitals dealt with the same issues. Another western hospital suggested MedQuist's CodeRunner.

Due Diligence for Remote Coding – Finding the Best Solution

McGaskey listened to the recommendations of her peers and decided to see if their solution fit her situation. She performed a management assessment to evaluate the current need, the environment, and the best solution. She assessed her organization's outpatient service coding volumes, any new services on the horizon (e.g., oncology), registry expenses, and time spent in recruiting skilled coders, benchmarking her facility against other, like organizations.

MedQuist's remote coding option appeared to be an ideal answer. Not only would Tahoe Forest have the technology to send their own coders home, but they would also benefit from easy access to MedQuist's team of professional coders for vacation, holiday and backup coverage. In the end, it was MedQuist's combination of remote coding technology and services that most appealed to McGaskey and her team.

Calculating a Return

Internally, McGaskey understood that many parties would be affected by remote coding. She identified all the various stakeholders and was careful to address their concerns and needs. These stakeholders included the chief financial officer, the Information Technology Department, clinical coders, the Human Resources Department and the Legal Department.

Benefits of MedQuist's
Remote Coding
Increased HIM
productivity
Decreased costs
Reduced DNFB
Great partnership
World-class company

In planning for remote coders, McGaskey was instructed to include staff and time for the scanning component. Since the organization's medical records were primarily in paper format, they were scanned into the system and accessed electronically by remote coders.

First, McGaskey's team identified which accounts to scan, and then which documents within each chart, as directed by the coding staff. In the end, they scanned the higher payment accounts first, which helped maximize the program's return on investment. This quickly improved turnaround time for the big accounts and reduced high-value DNFB.

Implementing the Solution

Tahoe Forest set up the MedQuist scanning station and access to MedQuist's coding team, and also employed one remote coder to get the project started. Of course, for their own coder, they had to provide equipment, security and a virtual private network (VPN) connection to the hospital's core information system. They also provided VPN access for the assigned MedQuist coders.

McGaskey undertook a detailed workflow analysis, and developed policies and procedures for the remote coding program. Major testing and quality control was conducted during the implementation phase, prior to the program "go live."

"Our implementation went very smoothly, and the tools did everything MedQuist said they would," comments McGaskey. "Services have been excellent and MedQuist has been extremely helpful by providing support whenever needed," she concludes.

Realizing the Benefits

For Tahoe Forest, a primary benefit of remote coding is the ability to provide relief during "spike" seasons, while also resolving the backlog issues. In fact, remote coding has gone so well at Tahoe Forest that outsourced remote coders have been kept on board two days a week, in addition to the organization's own remote coding employee. This frees up time for in-house employees to train and be educated in other services and functions, such as the Recovery Audit Contractor reviews, denied claims follow-up and more – a recruiting and retention benefit.

"Now that we are live with remote coding, we find that the benefits have exceeded our expectations," observes McGaskey. Not only has Tahoe Forest seen increased opportunities for employment, but coding turnaround times have improved, and all coding is completed within 72 hours. Declining DNFB provides a tangible return on investment that cost-justifies the service.

On the expense side, Tahoe Forest has eliminated costly contract coders and the associated travel expenses. Further, coding can occur seven days a week, providing more time to respond to RAC audits as mentioned above. Softer benefits include cost savings for employees who can now work from home, more space in the HIM department, flexibility in work schedules, and improved employee recruiting, retention and morale.

"Now, as an HIM Director, I can focus on other areas, because MedQuist has solved a management problem that was consuming an inordinate amount of my time," emphasizes McGaskey.



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