

# Coders Wanted, Experience Required

by Rita A. Scichilone, MHSA, RHIA, CCS, CCS-P, CHC, and Scott Mackenzie

**A** recent AHIMA survey confirms a critical need for qualified clinical coding professionals. It also reveals the high value employers place on experience and credentials.

Opportunities abound for skilled coders throughout the US—particularly in the Southwest—but candidates need demonstrated skills. Healthcare organizations are holding out for candidates with job experience and qualifications on their resumes.

Employers report real challenges in filling open slots with qualified candidates. Of the 59 percent of respondents who had open coding positions in the preceding 12 months, 76 percent reported having a difficult to extremely difficult time filling open positions. Nearly 1 in 3 (30 percent) had positions open for 4 to 6 months; nearly a quarter (23 percent) experienced vacancies of 7 months to a year (see figure).

Location doesn't help much. Two-thirds of all respondents said their region lacked qualified coding professionals. Shortages exist nationwide (see map), but they predominate in the Southwest and Northeast. Throughout the Southwest, 74 percent of respondents reported a lack of qualified candidates. The squeeze is least severe in the north-central states, where 57 percent of employers says they lack qualified candidates.

For graduates of coding programs these statistics can be frustrating. If there are so many opportunities, why do new grads have trouble landing their first jobs? The survey confirms at least two factors in play for new grads.

## Employers Holding out for Qualifications

The first is lack of job experience. More than half of employers surveyed cited lack of experience as a barrier for new grads (58 percent). Approximately one third felt that the graduates in their area were inadequately prepared for current jobs. Hiring policies also present barriers—24 percent of respondents reported that their facilities are required to hire candidates with experience.

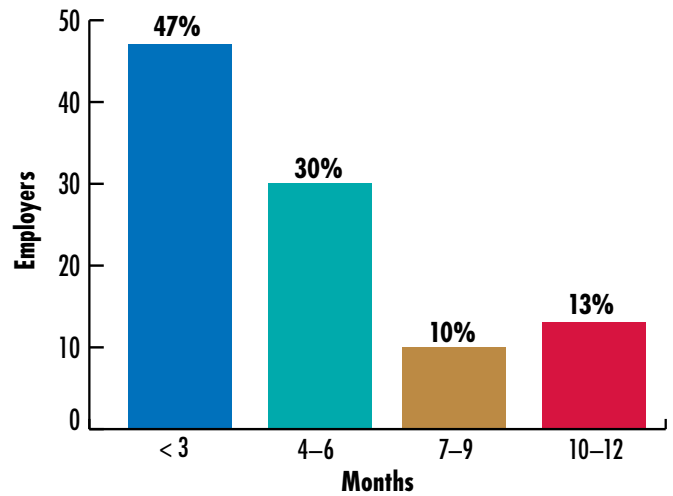
In fact, work experience is so important to employers that respondents cited it as the determining factor for judging suitability and qualifications for hiring (87 percent). Following factors included interviews (83 percent), credentials (81 percent), pre-employment coding exams (78 percent), and education level (66 percent).

The second factor is lack of certain credentials. Nearly half of employers (45 percent) reported that their preferred credential for employees is AHIMA's Certified Coding Specialist (CCS). This credential has been respected since 1992 as a mastery level skill assessment for hospital-based clinical coding competency. Another 29 percent preferred their employees hold Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT) credentials, illustrating the value in academic preparation in HIM domains. The chart on page 48 details overall preferences.

For coding professionals who have the skills and qualifications sought by employers, salaries are strong. Coders without experi-

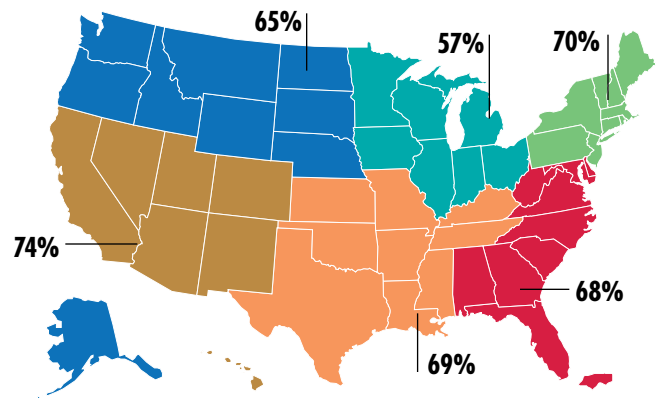
## Open Positions Slow to Fill

How long were your unfilled clinical coding positions open?



## Employment Is Hot in the Southwest

Would you consider that your area of the country is lacking in qualified coding professionals? ("Yes" responses shown)

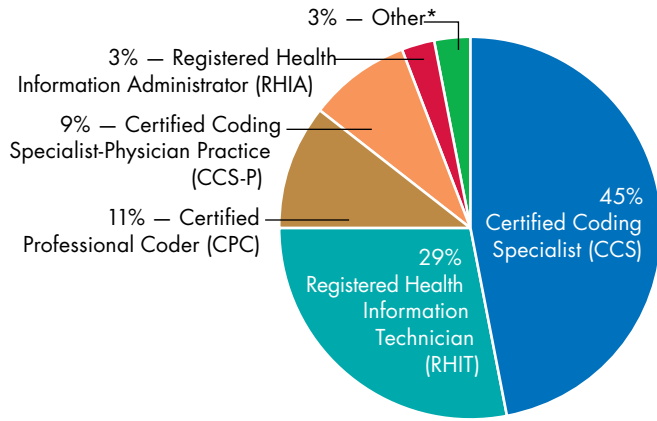


ence who get a foot in the door can expect modest beginnings. Slightly more than two-thirds of respondents who hire coders without experience compensate them in the range of \$20–30,000 per year (68 percent). Just 19 percent of new coders can expect to make more than that (see chart on page 48).

However, adding 2 to 3 years of experience increases the pay range dramatically. Half of coders with that many years under their belts earn between \$30,000 and \$40,000 (49 percent). Those with more than 3 years of experience see another boost. Half of

those coders (51 percent) earn in the range of \$35,000 to \$50,000. These salary jumps are a clear validation of the value professional coders bring to their organizations and the career growth that is possible in a short time for individuals with the right mix of knowledge, experience, and certification.

**CCS, RHIT Preferred**  
**What is your preferred credential for your coding professionals?**



\* Certified Coding Associate, Certified Professional Coder-Hospital, Certified Professional Coder-Payer, Registered Nurse or Licensed Practical Nurse

Coding professionals can take several clear messages from the survey results. Coders without a credential should consider preparing for one of the exams. New graduates who lack experience should seek exposure to hands-on work through opportunities such as internships. AHIMA and its affiliate state and local associations offer many resources for employers and for coding professionals seeking the professional development that can meet healthcare's increasing demand for quality in coded data.

**About the Survey**

The Workforce: Coding Professional Survey was conducted by AHIMA and the American Hospital Association (AHA) Central Office, with support from the American Medical Association.

In May 2006 a Web-based survey was sent to three lists of potential respondents, one list from each organization. A total of 1,317 responses were received, with 1,109 respondents reporting that they employ at least one medical coder. This group of 1,109 comprised the sample that responded to the remaining set of questions.

Additional data from the survey will be published by AHIMA and AHA Central Office. An executive summary will be available at [www.ahima.org/emerging\\_issues](http://www.ahima.org/emerging_issues). The full report will be available for purchase at [www.ahima.org/store](http://www.ahima.org/store). ❖

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**Income Rises Quickly with Experience**

What is the annual compensation in your facility for coding professionals with...

