

MORPHING FROM AN MT TO A CODER

... It all began with a peanut butter cup

I think we've all seen the vintage TV commercial about how the peanut butter cup was born; a masterpiece was created thanks to an accidental collision.

In 1992, I became a Medical Transcriptionist in a similar fashion; an accidental collision. As a restless medical secretary, I knew two things: I enjoyed the medical field, and also zipping along a Word Processing keyboard. Seeking Certification, I enrolled in a local college and in a mandated terminology class, I had an epiphany: colliding word processing and terminology equaled the perfect career for this eager student: and a Medical Transcriptionist was born.

For the next two decades, this eager student was gainfully employed and life was grand. Things started to change when I started hearing disturbing phrases such as "Voice Recognition Software" and "Outsourcing". I dismissed this foolishness as long as I could, but down the road I could no longer ignore articles in trade magazines describing the 'dying' art of transcription. I began having nightmares about Dragons! Yes ... transcriptionists were slowly being replaced ! Would it affect ME, personally; I chose to believe it would not.

Myself and my fellow MTs clung to each other through the years, scoffing at silly rumors about machines and Dragons taking away our livelihood; a livelihood that we've crafted so meticulously and skillfully! We scoffed some more and clung to each other - as tightly as shipwrecked survivors holding onto that last piece of floating debris - while screaming wildly for HELP!

Sadly, one by one, my colleagues drifted out to sea, never to be heard from again.

And there I was, barely holding on, alone with my thoughts. It was at this moment I decided to reinvent myself into that eager student once again. But I'm 20+ years older now?: Do I have it in me? Do I have what it takes? Am I too old for this? So back to my local college I went to see where I could possibly fit in.

MEDICAL CODING got my attention. What is a coder? What do I need to learn? I hear it's something like billing, right? Wrong? I started to ask questions. My employer encouraged me to learn coding ... take classes Ask all the questions I needed to. Slowly I came out of my now middle-aged shell in school and became inquisitive; piecing together familiar-sounding bits of information. I found myself buying notebooks ... buying reference books ... joining forums online. I was encouraged when I ACED terminology tests but DIScouraged when trying to understand the difference between extirpation and removal (don't ask)! My head swirled with infusion confusion !

I took courses on site. I took courses online. And then one day I got the call I dreaded: My employer called me into a meeting with herself, and HER boss. I knew what this was ... I was losing my MT job. Laid off. Fired. The bread line. Government cheese. I was

suddenly wishing I had started studying coding MUCH sooner than I had, as I was still a student, with no coding experience, and I now I've run out of time. Oh why oh why did I not take the warning signs more seriously???

If there was such a thing as an "anxiety pain scale from 1-10", you would've heard me whisper "11" as I entered the meeting room. Plus, I saw an additional face in the room - the coding supervisor. "Why is she here?", I thought. They need another witness to my execution?? I was already mortified at what I was about to be told, and seeing an additional person just added to my bleak demeanor.

So no surprises here: opening comments were EXACTLY what I dreaded, as I heard things like "transcription is a dying industry" ... and my position was 'no longer viable'; I was being replaced with a service and VR software, and my heart sank. I felt my face redden. I went into a mini-trance, thinking of what to do first as an unemployed person? How do I tell my family? During my trance, I heard my boss's voice mention something about "..... and the initiative you've taken, Joanne, in learning coding" . I left my trance and returned to the meeting, as I heard her add "and we've decided to offer you an entry level coding position".

To say I was in shock would be an understatement. I couldn't believe my own ears, and at first I thought they were toying with me. Entry level? Train me? This was unheard of, and my eyes welled up with tears of joy, shock, and gratefulness.

A few weeks later I began training as an ER coder. Despite having a splitting R51 every night for the first few weeks, I loved learning about coding; the ins. The outs. The right way. The wrong way. I spent the first year taking notes, and making hard copies of difficult cases, while highlighting key elements. I kept cheat notes around my monitor; . Of course I was convinced I would NEVER be able to do 100 accounts a day, but eventually my productivity climbed and I started rattling off codes in my sleep.

I've been a coder 2 ½ years now and I never thought I would say this twice in a lifetime, but I LOVE MY JOB! A very proud moment was when I received my updated ID badge with my new job title, "Clinical Coding Specialist". Me a Specialist? Wow!! I walked away thinking how all my hard work paid off - and you're never too old to change your life for the better.

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