



# Collaborative Externship Model

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A case study for healthcare documentation companies

The Collaborative Externship Model was created to help healthcare documentation (also known as medical transcription) students gain work experience without placing an undue staffing burden on MTSOs. NEMT's case study explains the process for other MTSOs interested in using this approach.

## Collaborative Externship Model

### Executive summary

The Collaborative Externship Model is a joint effort between AHDI-approved schools and participating medical transcription service organizations (MTSOs). The difference between a traditional internship and a collaborative-model externship is that the externship requires teachers to edit and grade students' work. While the MTSO provides the account specifications and audio files, the student is managed by the school and teacher on a day-to-day basis. This system takes most of the operational burden off the MTSO, making the externship a more business-friendly venture than the traditional internship.

Students who complete the externship and go to work for the MTSO have spent significantly less time in training and mentoring than other new healthcare documentation specialists. Thus in the long run, the externship is an efficiency measure for MTSOs.

### Introduction

In 2011, New England Medical Transcription (NEMT) and Sheridan Technical Center in Florida partnered to create the first-of-its-kind externship in the healthcare documentation industry. The Collaborative Externship Model was initiated by Betsy Ertel, CEO of SpeedType. Ertel brought together Sheridan transcription teacher Paula Goode and NEMT president Linda Allard, who both agreed to pilot the first externship class.

The Collaborative Externship Model is created to be mutually beneficial for students, companies, and the industry. Students benefit by gaining real work experience, transcribing authentic physician voice files from real accounts. The company benefits because students who complete the externship are given preferential hiring. As new hires, these externship graduates need less training, mentoring, and editing since they are already familiar with their doctors' dictation habits and account specifications. The school benefits by turning out students with a higher skill level, better job prospects, and preference in hiring. The industry as a whole benefits by having a more efficient,

***“We’ve always been committed to helping the newest members of the transcription industry get a foot in the door, but any time you invest in recent graduates, you’re taking a big risk. This externship shares the burden of training while providing assurance that the students will be work-ready for our accounts when they complete their classes.”***

*- NEMT President Linda Allard  
(Matrix Magazine, September, 2011)*



experienced, and real-world-trained workforce that is better prepared coming right out of school to meet the demands of healthcare delivery.

## Partnering

The first step in the Collaborative Externship Model process is matching schools and MTSOs. This is most easily achieved through an outside “matchmaker” or go-between. Betsy Ertel is fulfilling this role and functioning as the initial contact person. MTSOs that are interested in participating can contact the go-between to sign up and schools that want to place students can contact Betsy at [Betsy@speedtype.com](mailto:Betsy@speedtype.com) to be assigned to an MTSO.

On the MTSO side, the majority of the workload is in the initial setup. MTSOs will likely find that they need to involve an IT staffer, an operations project manager, and a HIPAA compliance officer. In addition, a backup project manager should be involved, particularly if the primary project manager has other varied duties that may pull him or her away from the externship program.

Once contact has been made and a partnership established, the project manager (generally the MTSO's operations chief) will outline the process for the teacher. Transcription/healthcare documentation teachers are expected to select top-performing students nearing the end of their classes.

## HIPAA

Before any work can begin, all teachers and students must take a HIPAA class and test. Students never work with files containing protected health information (PHI), but the HIPAA assessment and certificate are an extra measure of security to protect the MTSO and to reassure clients.

Students and teachers should be tested using the same classes and assessment used by the MTSO's paid workforce. These classes generally take only a few hours online and are often approved for medicolegal continuing education credits through AHDI.

This process should be explained to the teacher in the first letter after the partnership has been signed. The letter should instruct the teacher to first send the names and email addresses of each student so the MTSO can send them instructions for taking the HIPAA compliance class and test.

For this step, NEMT recommends that students work directly with the MTSO's HIPAA compliance officer – not the project manager or teacher. The reason for this is that working through different processes, following instructions, and completing various types of paperwork for different people is



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part of a work-from-home job. The goal is to help teach skills, enhance knowledge, and expose the externs to myriad situations they will encounter in a corporate job.

Once the teacher has sent the names and email addresses of the students, the MTSO's HIPAA compliance officer will send each student – and the teacher – instructions for taking the class and test. After they have passed the test, students and the teacher should be sent certificates of completion and must then sign the same HIPAA compliance agreements that are signed by the MTSO's paid workforce members.

Students should not proceed any further in the externship until they and their teacher have passed the test and signed the HIPAA compliance agreements.

## Audio files

While students and their teacher are completing the HIPAA process, MTSO personnel should be selecting, categorizing, and uploading audio files. This process may involve an IT specialist, the project manager, and/or an account manager.

The goal of the externship is to train students for an account on which they will actually transcribe as professionals, so audio files should be selected accordingly. These files should be recorded by a real client dictator but must not contain any protected health information (PHI). Depending on the MTSO's needs, it would also be beneficial to provide audio files from dictators with difficult accents or speech patterns, to give students experience on more challenging reports.

After the files have been selected, the project manager should verify that they are all devoid of any protected health information. They are then categorized by specialty and uploaded onto a secure transfer site.

## Starting work

Once the files have been uploaded and the teacher and students have completed their HIPAA tests and agreements, the MTSO project manager can send out passwords and instructions.

The teacher should be sent answer keys to each audio file, along with a link to the transfer site and the

***“There’s always a learning curve in the beginning. One of the big challenges for our students is learning the difference between the Book of Style and what the client wants.”***

*- Paula Goode, Sheridan Technical Center instructor  
(Plexus Magazine, May 2012)*

username and password. At the same time, the students are sent the link, username, and password, and the account specifications they will need to follow for each file.

Students should be given exact instructions for downloading, saving, naming, transcribing and sending each report. Reports should be emailed directly to their teacher for grading – they should not be sent to the MTSO.

In giving these instructions, we recommend you explain that the files and reports do not contain any protected health information – if they did, the reports could not be emailed under HIPAA regulations.

At this point it is also important to remind the students about the importance of following each step in the instructions exactly, paying special attention to account specifications. Teachers should base student grades in part on their adherence to instructions and specifications.

Under the Collaborative Externship Model, this is the last contact the MTSO will have with the students until the externship is complete. Students will email all reports directly to their teacher and will work with the teacher to handle problems, gain feedback, and receive their grades.

## Post-externship

After students have completed the externship (roughly eight weeks), the teacher should send the MTSO the final grade, with comments or evaluations, for each student. Depending on school policy, students may need to sign a release for this information.

***“I still have questions almost every day, but I can keep up and I think a lot of that is due to the externship.”***

*- Eva Molineux, NEMT transcriptionist  
(Plexus Magazine, May 2012)*

Eligible graduates may then be invited to begin the MTSO's formal hiring process. This may involve joining a paid internship program or taking an entry test. NEMT reserves its new-healthcare documentation specialist positions for graduates of the externship program but MTSOs may want to create their own policies for hiring externship graduates.

## Troubleshooting

The primary pitfall on the MTSO side is time. In most cases, MTSO staffers are already working at full capacity. Starting a new project – without short-term revenue potential – may be a daunting proposition. However, at NEMT, we have found that the long-term benefits are worth the short-term

work, particularly because most steps only need to be done once and can be reused for subsequent classes of students.

## **MTSO**

NEMT recommends that the MTSO dedicate a primary and a backup project manager to the program. Because the project manager is almost certainly a high-ranking executive, any number of operational issues could pull him or her away from the externship, leaving students waiting for audio files, instructions, HIPAA tests, or account specifications. A backup project manager, involved and in-the-know from the very beginning, can be tapped to step in if the primary project manager is pulled away for a long period of time to deal with, for instance, client issues or a new implementation.

In order to lighten the workload for future classes, we recommend the project manager plan ahead with an eye toward creating standardized steps that can be repeated easily with each subsequent class. In particular, audio files can be reused as long as the account is active, and instructional letters can be standardized for each step in the process. For instance, teachers who are interested in beginning a partnership, but who want more details about the company's specific program, are sent Letter A. After the school has signed on and is ready to begin, the teacher is sent Letter B, which includes step-by-step instructions for setup. After the teacher setup process has been completed, each student is sent Letter C, which includes instructions for their own setup. NEMT currently uses a total of four different letters for teachers plus three for students.

## **School**

For the school, the biggest issue may be managing student expectations, particularly in terms of money. It is common across the industry for MTSOs to hire new graduates, only to see them quit within weeks when they do not immediately earn the wages they believed they would see. In an industry where earnings are based on speed and accuracy, new healthcare documentation specialists have a clear handicap at the beginning. Losing a new hire is difficult for any MTSO; losing one after investing time into the externship is doubly hard. The school and teachers can help prevent this issue by giving students reasonable expectations about starting rates and the number of lines a new healthcare documentation specialist can transcribe in a week.

Managing student expectations and the quality of their work is particularly important in the externship because the MTSO-school relationship depends on mutual

***“Some students just aren’t ready, even with the externship, and we’ve got a responsibility to the companies.***

***We only put students in the externship that will do well and we only push them to apply for jobs if we’re sure they’ll be good professionals.”***

*- Judy Duggan, Sheridan Technical Center instructor  
(Plexus Magazine, May 2012)*

trust. The teachers place only the best students in the externship program, trying to ensure that those they recommend will go on to make good professional healthcare documentation specialists for the company they externed with. The MTSO must work to help provide a quality externship education to the students, including a real-life work environment and relevant reports and specifications.

## **Students**

Students may find that the primary pitfall is that real-life transcription is far slower and more difficult than what they have previously experienced in the classroom. Overcoming frustration while maintaining accuracy is of key importance. One of the most useful tools for students is high-quality word-expansion software. NEMT recommends the SpeedType system because of its productivity measurements and dictionaries, which students can create and take with them after they graduate for use with any company and platform.

***“We as an industry have got to figure out a way to turn more students into professionals more quickly.”***

*- SpeedType CEO Betsy Ertel  
(Matrix Magazine, September 2011)*

## **Conclusion**

As the industry continues to change, partnerships such as the Collaborative Externship Model will become increasingly essential to maintaining a high-quality workforce. The program was created to help students, but its benefit to the MTSO is significant. At NEMT, the initial time spent setting up the externship program was immediately repaid in time saved with the first hire. Students who complete the externship program, with all mentoring, grading, and feedback handled by the teacher, required significantly less time in training after they were hired and were already proficient in their account specifications from the start.

While the program has come with initial challenges, NEMT firmly believes in its externship model and is committed to helping other MTSOs implement similar programs, for the benefit of students and the industry as a whole.

For specific help in starting up an externship program, including assistance with instructional letters, contact NEMT president Linda Allard at 207-443-6919 or [work@nemtinc.com](mailto:work@nemtinc.com).