High staff turnover - can it be reduced?

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There is a saying going around that says 'nobody is irreplaceable'. This is quite true, but when you lose competent, dependable, highly-qualified staff, this has a whole new meaning. It affects the whole company and its employees. High staff turnover in the healthcare sector is an absolute, undeniable reality, especially in this time of nursing shortages. One can debate about the reasons for the high turnover, but a solution should be found before it becomes a major crisis. Therefore it is important to look at ways/ suggestions on how to address this problem.

The effect of high staff turnover

This high turnover rate, specifically amongst nurses, causes numerous negative effects on the healthcare system. The major effect is not on the company finances, but it especially affects the ability to meet patient needs and the provision of quality patient care. The high turnover causes a low morale amongst the other employees and there are additional expenses to the company which could be spent better in other areas. Each organisation should do research in order to know how to keep employees feeling accomplished and appreciated. Preventable expenses go into recruiting, training, employee benefits and ramp-up time for all new employees. It is of importance to know that the company's bottom-line employees are affected by turnover.

Replacing an employee – the costs involved

According to Clever (2013) the following costs are identified when an employee resigns. These costs affect the resigning employee, the company and the remaining employees.

Direct costs	Indirect/'hidden' costs

• Termination includes
  ° Exit interviews to be held with employees
  ° Higher unemployment taxes
  ° Severance process
• Replacement
  ° Advertising in different media of choice
  ° Agency usage (temporary) until vacancies have been filled
  ° Interviewing all potential candidates
  ° Qualification/licensure verifications
  ° Some instances travel and relocation costs, normally for the more senior management
• Training of new employees
  ° On-boarding process, as done by Mediclinic to orientate new employees on the company and hospital setup
  ° Skills assessment through practical procedures done
  ° Induction programme and period
• Vacancy cost
  ° Overtime expenditures of current employees covering extra shifts
  ° Agency staff usage increases when there are vacant posts, in order to cover department demand
	• Reduction of quality of care
	  ° Making use of (possibly) less experienced and less committed agency staff
	• Low morale
	  ° Remaining staff are affected by fellow employees leaving, especially when it was someone they could look up to and count on
	• Productivity lost
	  ° It gets lost from agency staff, as well as from exiting employees
	• Workload increase
	  ° Because of the vacancy left, the workload of the staff remaining also increases. It increases their responsibility, which increases pressure and workload when having to constantly check up on agency or less experienced employees
	• Cost of a new employee
	  ° They are paid the same amount, although whilst they're coming up to speed, they are still less productive. This means that you e.g. pay for two professional nurses, but only get the care of 1.5 professional nurses
	• Historical knowledge
	  ° It is not easy to replace the underlying operational understanding of employees within the facility. Employees that have been working for the company long know exactly what is expected of them, and they don't need to constantly ask/be reminded

Suggestions for decreasing staff turnover

In order to reduce employee turnover, a process should be started in the early recruitment stages and selection processes. This should continue throughout the employment relationship. It is also important to try and keep employees happy where they are, as far as possible.

A good manager should be sensitive and identify when employees are unhappy, and address the problem immediately. In order to accomplish this, a manager should be sincere in caring. Give honest feedback and sincere praise (do not only complain and criticise the staff) – remember you are working with adults and they know when you are not sincere. Positive feedback leads to good feelings, and this keeps employees motivated. They focus then on continuing with the 'rewarded' behaviour, and productivity is increased.

It is human nature to like being appreciated, thus reward your employees unexpectedly. This might be difficult in large companies, but only a tiny gift, personal 'thank-you-note' or a pat on the shoulder/hug makes people feel appreciated. According to PN R Strydom, the previous Unit Manager (2014), nursing staff do feel appreciated when receiving (even very small) gifts from management.

The manager should know her staff. If you show interest in your employees, above their professional capabilities, they will feel as if they really matter to you. A personal touch will motivate them (without asking) to support the manager and improve on their productivity and team-effort.

The author has personally found that it is also of benefit to know your employees' personality types. Let them do personality tests and allow them to discuss this within a group setting. Highlight each personality's strong and weak points and discuss how to accommodate each and every one in the team. It is of the utmost importance that each team member then also work on their weak/offensive points in order to increase the effective team function.

Build on the strong points and use them. Try not to have conflicting personalities work together, if this will benefit the team more. The manager should ensure that all teams are equally strong so the department can function optimally at all times.

The following suggestions were made on what the company (hospital) can do to decrease staff turnover:

Staff should be empowered with more autonomy, control and improved work climates, without the manager losing control. Provide employees with more clinical information that will help them to enhance decision-making. Motivate employees to make suggestions, and listen to their opinions. Encourage nurses to get a mentor with whom they can share their experiences, and to whom they can go for advice.

Provide employees with fair working conditions and above-average pay – this might be a bit difficult to accomplish seeing that individuals differ on the meaning of 'fair' and 'above-average'.

"Don't just hire a body, hire a good fit" (Clever 2013). Appoint people that are most qualified who perceive a job in your company as exciting and a privilege. Review performance management forms, including disciplinary and corrective action reviews and commendation forms.

Effects of job demand

Edmunds MW, et al (2010) examined the effects of job demand, job control, and job-related social support on the nurses' turnover intentions. This has shown that high-demand job situations are not necessarily high-strain positions. On the other hand, nurses might have the perception that their job is very stressful when high-demand situations are combined with low job control. Low job control includes low skill discretion and low decision authority. This can result in harm to nurses' health. There are four types of jobs predicted by the job-strain model:

High-strain jobs are where the job demand is high and job control low; active job is where both the job demand and job control are high; passive job, both job demand and job control are low; and finally, low-strain job where job demand is low and job control is high.

Feedback received from Mr R Jewaskewietz, Mediclinic Bloemfontein's previous 'stand in' Human Resources Manager (2014) is that there are two factors that play a very important role, especially in a hospital of this size: Workload is not carried equally by all, maybe because of the competence of nursing staff, and the ideal would be if working hours could be more suitable for employees. Salary plays an important part, but not as much as these two factors.

Support

Social support reduces the negative effects of job strain. In order to prevent or buffer the potentially harmful effects of high-strain jobs, support might provide a successful way of coping with this strain. In order for the manager, or company, to socially support their employees, a variety of resources can be used to assist employees, individually, in their workplaces. This might include task-related information, positive feedback or praise from managers AND shiftleaders, concern for others in the workplace and co-workers' help. In an ICU setup this has been proven to be quite important when team members assist one another with, for example, an admission or resuscitation. This affects their morale and team-spirit. When the team can stand together and support each other after a difficult day, this can be like glue holding the team together. Social support increases satisfaction, perceived performance, and encouragement.

It is sometimes difficult to give the support everyone feels they deserve. One attempts to support an employee in the best possible way and also according to what you as manager know will work best with each individual. As a manager one sometimes needs to lead and at other times one has to manage situations. When having to make decisions that affect the whole team it impacts on the morale and work performance of the team.

Looking at supervisory support – this also reduces staff turnover, and has already been discussed earlier in the article. Another addition to supervisory support is when the manager arranges (and motivates) his/her employees to attend debriefing sessions after the trauma of patients dying and difficult and very stressful situations or busy times. The manager should ensure a positive work climate – his/her attitude or emotional state affects the shift for the day.

Conclusion

In conclusion might be said that communication and support are very important in order to keep employees motivated. Listen to their concerns, and when they see that their manager really supports them, although all their requests cannot be granted, they should be encouraged. Give them the opportunity to come up with suggestions/ solutions. Let them be part of the decision-making process. And remember that they're also part of a family outside of the work environment; try, and have that balanced as far as possible.
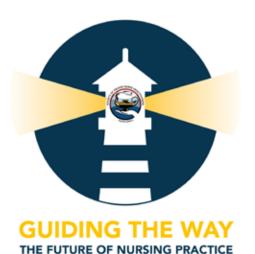
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