



## Health Care Strategy Insights: Building a Resilient Workforce

***About the authors:** Brian Augustian is a Principal in Deloitte Consulting's Human Capital Practice. Bill Laughlin, a Principal, and Sarah Wiley, a Managing Director, are leaders within Deloitte's Health Care Strategy practice. This editorial represents their perspective on how health care organizations are combating workforce burnout caused by staffing shortages and COVID-19, while building increased resiliency within their organization.*

Health care organizations have witnessed employee burnout (defined as “a type of work-related stress – a state of emotional exhaustion that can also involve a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity”<sup>1</sup>) for years. However, burnout has become even more widespread due to the increased emotional and social burdens placed on health care employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. This experience is shared across executive, clinical, and non-clinical staff. However, a recent survey by the Washington Post & Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that clinical staff burnout has reached epidemic-level proportions; 55% of front-line health care workers reported burnout and 62% reported facing mental health repercussions because of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, staffing shortages and dwindling community support have amplified this burnout. While almost all U.S. hospitals are facing staff shortages, roughly 16% had critical staffing shortages as of Oct. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>3</sup> This requires health care CSOs to develop creative strategies to 1) address the burnout and related workforce challenges, 2) support and empower

employees, and 3) increase individual and organizational resiliency. Furthermore, the inherent distinctions between the two overarching segments of health care staff, clinical and non-clinical (generally back-office roles), means that CSOs will need to tailor strategies to meet the needs of both employee populations.

### **Challenges with Retention & Recruitment of Clinical Staff**

Issues of health care retention and recruitment are most prevalent among clinical staff, who are exhausted after the turmoil of the past 18 months. In a recent study of over 20,000 American physicians, nearly 48% reported experiencing symptoms of burnout as a result of the pandemic<sup>4</sup>. These high burnout rates are contributing to increases in turnover and shortages of workers. Other factors increasing turnover include:

- **High paying opportunities for travel nurses:** Many RNs are looking to optimize for financial benefits, especially early career nurses looking to pay off loans. For this segment, high-paying travel positions entice nurses to move to high-volume markets that are willing to pay a premium for their employment. Within certain markets, the hourly salary for travel nurses has increased by the hundreds – with reports that some travel nurses are making up to \$10,000 a week.<sup>5</sup> Health systems have, in turn, created various initiatives to retain their staff nurses; many of the strategies involve compensation increases. A hospital system in Cleveland recently started a \$400-a-day overtime bonus for staff nurses which would result in a total of \$1,390 a day for certain 12-hour overtime shifts.<sup>6</sup>
- **Lack of support for environmental services workers:** Often called the “invisible workers,” environmental services staff play a major role in keeping hospitals, clinics, and nursing home facilities sanitary throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Like physicians and nurses, environmental services workers are frontline staff, but they have felt less support from their organizations and from the general public – both factors that make this group part of the 20-30% of frontline US staff considering leaving their positions.<sup>7</sup>
- **Mixed employee sentiments towards vaccine mandates:** While some health care organizations are seeing staff compliance with COVID-19 vaccine mandates, others are experiencing significant pushback to these requirements. In some cases, organizations are experiencing the loss of employees who would rather leave their position than comply with the mandate.

While health care organizations are seeing a decline in some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, clinical staff turnover is likely to remain a challenge even as the “next normal” emerges. COVID-19 has changed the way many employees approach work, which will require greater consideration of employee needs and preferences as CSOs develop retention strategies. Some potential strategies include:

- **Financial incentives for new and current staff:** Organizations are increasingly turning to lucrative signing bonuses that come with a multi-year retention element to draw clinical staff to their organizations. Some organizations are also looking to provide the opportunity to increase short-term earnings for current staff by offering bonuses for picking up extra shifts during these difficult times.
- **Higher-education support:** By providing higher education support and benefits, health care organizations can enable unlicensed workers to gain skills for various clinical roles. Not only does this expand the workforce of qualified clinical workers, but it can also increase loyalty to the organization that is funding the education.
- **Redesigning care models:** CSOs should evaluate their organizations to determine how redesigning current care models may enable a more sustainable solution for the recruitment and retention challenges. Staffing shortages can be utilized as a catalyst to determine how sites of care can be optimized, how technology can be leveraged to reduce repetitive and manual tasks, and how operating models can be improved for efficiency and quality. This approach can also involve aligning HR and talent strategy to prepare for organizations' future state vision for improved care delivery.

### **Preparing for the Future of Workplace with Non-Clinical Employees**

Health care organizations are also noticing attitudinal shifts in terms of non-clinical employees' preferences for the where and how they work. According to an April 2020 Glassdoor survey, 72% of employees initially indicated that they were excited to return to their workplace. However, this percentage lessened as the pandemic continued, and by July 2021, the percentage of employees excited to return to the office had dropped to 66%.<sup>8</sup> CSOs have described how only a subset of their non-clinical workforce wants to return to the office after becoming accustomed to the flexibility of work-from-home. As such, CSOs will have to develop tailored strategies that meet varied employee needs as they craft their "future of work" strategies. Some strategies and considerations for CSOs to keep in mind include:

- **Flexible work model** – According to a Gensler Global Workforce Survey, most office workers prefer a hybrid workplace model moving forward.<sup>9</sup> While the work-from home environment brings improvements in well-being and flexibility, virtual meetings cannot recreate the benefits of socializing with co-workers and in-person collaboration. Future of work models should be multi-dimensional and flex to employees' needs and project or role requirements. Given the difficulties in the childcare market due to the pandemic,<sup>10</sup> working parents may need additional flexibility and/or support as activities move back to the office.

- **Closing culture and connectivity gaps** – As more employees transition into their “future of work,” CSOs will need to be intentional about closing any culture and connectivity gaps within and across teams. Programs that build social connections can enable a strong culture regardless of work location. Focusing on equity and inclusion within hybrid teams, will help to ensure that all employees feel engaged, respected, and heard. CSOs can also consider introducing workplace mentorship programs for professionals (regardless of age or tenure), creating social / activity groups, or having leaders set “office hours” to allow for employees to foster relationships with and learn from the leaders.

## Conclusion

As a result of increased burnout, staffing shortages, and emerging employee preferences, health care CSOs have found themselves needing to be positive, motivating, and consistent coaches within their organizations. Even when feeling overwhelmed and, at times, drained, CSOs are actively focused on implementing strategies that address employee needs and builds resiliency. The pandemic has undoubtedly been one of the hardest periods of many CSO’s careers, but by focusing on authentic engagement and openness, CSOs will be well positioned to lead their organizations into the next era of growth and success.

*Please reach out to Brian, Bill, or Sarah with any additional questions.*



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