Creating a labor analytics-driven advantage
Happier employees enable better patient quality care
Creating a labor analytics-driven advantage | Introduction

When you ask a health care worker why they do what they do, the response often is because they wanted to help people. That’s where the joy of the job comes to fruition. They want to help make people better, cure or prevent disease, and give family members good news. While there’s a lot of wonderful that goes on in health care every day, there will always be opportunity for improvement, especially as technology and research advances.

The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) is a nonprofit that has been dedicated to finding those opportunities since the 1980s. The group designed the industry’s Triple Aim goal. Enhancing America’s health system performance involves a coordinated aim at patient quality care, population health, and cost savings. Many of the metrics that health care organizations are measured against today are based on the Triple Aim mindset. There’s financial incentive to getting it right: Labor is one of health care’s biggest expenses and deserves special attention.¹

Improving the lives of patients, the health of communities, just might be dependent on the joy and engagement of the health care workforce. Health care workers should be on top of their game every day, working to enable the best possible outcome for every single patient. It’s not always easy, but it’s so important in this field of work. One study of hospital staff shows a direct link exists between quality patient care and satisfied health care employees.²

The answer to better patient quality care, under the pressure of cost constraints and improvement strategies, may be in a happier workforce. Happier employees tend to lead to happier patients. Organizations can make a positive impact in a relatively short amount of time if they center on three key initiatives: insightful scheduling, continuous employee engagement and empowerment, and finally, robust digital interaction with their employer that gets people back to doing what they love, taking care of patients. All are within reach and can produce positive outcomes. Better employee and patient experiences impact word of mouth, competitiveness, attrition, and team-building. It’s really about making life easier, more flexible, and more rewarding for health care workers. It is, after all, a people-run business.
Work overload is a very real problem in health care and it doesn’t appear there will be much relief anytime soon: More than 65 million baby boomers will turn 70 over the next two decades, increasing the age group’s population by 30-50% before the year 2035. Demands on the health care system are bound to increase and the industry is already experiencing staff shortages, especially in nursing. When a floor is staffed too low to handle the demand, or workers are overworked and disengaged, metrics related to quality patient care can suffer. There is increasing awareness within the patient safety movement that fatigue, even partial sleep deprivation, impairs performance.

Being smart about how health workers are staffed will become an increasingly important business initiative. One study published by Health Care Management Review shows that nurse staffing is essential for the delivery of high-quality patient care—metrics such as reductions in adverse events, decreased length of stay, and more efficient care processes, all improve. The study noted that nurse staffing can provide a competitive advantage to hospitals with higher patient satisfaction levels, and as a result, better financial performance. Cutting staff to save costs may help in the short term, but hurts in the long term.

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Demonstrated benefits of insightful scheduling
Creating a labor analytics-driven advantage | Accomplishing effectiveness without sacrificing quality

Accomplishing effectiveness without sacrificing quality

If health care and nursing supervisors had scheduling analysis capabilities, a compound task could become easier. Staffing health care workers can be complex. Holding supervisors accountable for unknowns when lives are at stake often results in scheduling unnecessary hours. With the right analytics and insight into staffing schedules, people can gain confidence in staffing decisions. They can increase worker satisfaction and the quality of care in their organization while staying in the right cost structure by:

**Reducing fatigue and overload.**
Effective scheduling can reduce employee fatigue and improve quality care. Health care worker shifts are around the clock. Thirty-two percent of health care workers report they do not get enough sleep. Restrictions exist around how many 12-hour shifts can be done and shift lengths depend on roles. A rule-defined system can reduce errors in scheduling.

**Hitting on-call staffing benchmarks.**
Most hospitals have an on-call metric of 4/5 to 1—meaning the worker is called back one out of five times; the benchmark metric should be 3/2 to 1. Flexibility may be needed for trauma and emergency situations, but analytics can show staffing supervisors how to staff on-call more effectively and not compromise safety.

**Predicting demand.**
Analytics provide trends over time and help predict future need. For example, there may be an annual festival that brings thousands more to a city—making sure staffing matches potential demand helps increase patient quality care.

**Staffing fairer.**
With the right scheduling tools, staffing is focused around quality and fairness, taking bias and favoritism out of the picture and giving everyone a fair shot for preferred shifts or overtime in a cost-effective way.

However, to keep workers happy, scheduling should involve more than just managing overtime effectively. It should be designed so the employee is more engaged with his or her work. It should allow for flexibility and be meaningful.

The engaged workforce

To look at what impacted outcomes, Gallup studied outcomes at more than 200 hospitals using staffing and other variables. It found that nurse engagement was the number one predictor of mortality variation across hospitals—the commitment and emotional involvement of the nurses on staff was even more important than how many were there. With Medicare reimbursements now being tied closely to outcomes, the financial incentives for increasing employee engagement come into focus. Organizations with highly accessible leaders that empower employees to make decisions have a greater likelihood of increasing employee satisfaction.

Nothing affects engagement like burnout. How much someone is expected to do in a timeframe should be reasonable and stress levels manageable. Claire Caruso, a registered nurse, talks about the negative impacts of long shift hours. "Fatigue-related errors could harm patients; and lack of sleep can increase the risk for reduced performance on the job, and can negatively affect their own health and wellbeing." When people have to work overtime consistently, it’s often harder to be enthusiastic about the job, even if paid fairly. The effect? Patients can leave with a negative experience. It has an impact on the quality of their patient interactions. It’s not good for anyone.

Analytics can identify shortages that result in incremental overtime. Generally, there should only be seven to nine missed breaks annually per employee, more tend to indicate staff shortages. If staff are getting called back to the floor regularly, and missing lunch or

Drivers for an engaged health care workforce

- Workload, balance, and stress
- Positive work environment
- Meaningful work
- Growth opportunity
- Hands-on management
- Trust in leadership

Finding the right balance to labor

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Digital interactions on staffing help increase employee satisfaction

 Millennials tend to be digitally dependent. Their ability to get information quickly is their life experience. It’s a table-stakes for providers. People should have easy access to their schedules. And if organizations don’t deliver, employees will often create a digital experience for themselves. How many people have taken pictures of their hard copy schedule? Well-designed digital systems enable staff to do far more than simply view schedules. Millennials typically want schedules that are more flexible and aligned with the work they’re passionate about. Allowing them to swap shifts from their phone with approvals offers flexibility, greater control, and work-life balance—all contributing to a more engaged workforce.

Metrics and scheduling tools can hit the engagement button, which can lead to happier employees and better patient outcomes. With the right tools, staffing specialists can not only staff more efficiently, but also staff with intention and cost structure.

Outcomes for better quality care

1. A workforce management center of excellence that includes the C-suite-level stakeholders and a core team should be created that helps focus on things like the time and scheduling and the correlations between patient quality care, patient satisfaction, and outcomes. Positive patient outcomes help increase employee satisfaction; it’s why many people got into health care.

2. Regular discussions should occur around what the goals are and what metrics are being used. It can’t just be productivity or just quality. It should be metrics around employee satisfaction, patient satisfaction, and workforce-related metrics that impact those satisfaction levels.

3. Once the initial analysis and remediation opportunities are identified, it’s critical to establish a long-term plan for maintaining better staffing and employee engagement practices. You can start with reviewing and refining the basic processes around the intake of time and how employees engage with the schedule. Examine mobility and virtual work capabilities and make sure you’re leveraging those opportunities to enable maximum benefit.

Patient quality care and satisfaction has very real financial implications. Research proves that higher employment engagement leads to the stronger outcomes that all health care organizations should be striving for in Triple Aim. Analytics, digital interactions, and metrics showcasing clearer insights into staffing are tools that health care organizations can use to hit the health grade and enable the type of work-life balance that many employees will expect over the next few decades.
Endnotes


5. Damian Everhart, MS, RN. PhD Student in Health Services Research, Donna Neff, PhD, RN, DSNAP, Associate Professor, Mona Al-Amin, PhD, MPH, Assistant Professor, June Nogle, PhD, Associate Research Scientist, and Robert Weech-Maldonado, PhD, MBA, Professor and L.R. Jordan Endowed Chair. “The Effects of Nurse Staffing on Hospital Financial Performance: Competitive Versus Less Competitive Markets.” Health Care Management Review. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4543286/


