

Creative Ways to Deal with the Pharmacy Staffing Shortage

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Mr. Spravzoff is Director of Pharmacy Services at Flagstaff Medical Center (FMC), Flagstaff, Arizona, a 250-bed community hospital that is part of the Northern Arizona Healthcare System. The system has three pharmacies—an inpatient service, a retail pharmacy, and a home infusion service. The department has more than 40 full-time pharmacists and a total of 55 employees. The rural nature of the Flagstaff area, combined with its climate, pose barriers to recruiting some candidates. The area is known to be a nice place to live but a hard place to make a living. This can make it hard to recruit people from two-career families. To lure qualified pharmacists, the department promotes its progressive clinical environment and decentralized pharmacy services.

Innovative Recruitment Tactics

Innovative tactics are needed to attract qualified pharmacists to FMC, according to Spravzoff. Wages must be competitive; however, an attractive employment package, which includes support for relocation expenses, a sign-on bonus, and a generous tuition reimbursement plan, is also important.

FMC's goal is to hire only the best. The department seeks people who will be "impact players." Another guideline is to "hire for attitude and train for skill." The department also places a high value on diversity in the broadest sense of the word. "We need hunters, but we also need gatherers," said Spravzoff. Age is no barrier to employment. For example, one of the department's most successful new hires was a 70-year-old pharmacist. He had let his license expire. The department supplied the training he needed, he entered as an intern, and he is now doing well as a part-time employee. "Bounce backs" are another source of new staff. FMC recognizes that some employees find out that the grass is not greener elsewhere and gladly welcomes them back to its ranks.

Recruitment is viewed as an ongoing process in which every employee has a role. Staff are urged to scout for techs, sometimes from the ranks of FMC employees in other departments. Word of mouth is an important recruitment tactic, especially for students.

Once an initial contact has been made, prompt follow-up is essential. E-mail and more traditional methods of communication are used to stay in touch.

Retention Techniques

"Love 'em or lose 'em" aptly summarizes the FMC approach to retention. Managers identify the special strengths and interests of

each employee. "Probe your staff to see what's going on with them," Spravzoff urged. Active listening, using the "EAR" (Explore, Acknowledge, Respond) strategy, works well. The department uses the Quality of Life assessment tool to identify specific areas to work on with each employee. Bottom-up goal setting is encouraged. Under this process, the individual's aspirations are aligned with those of the department and the institution. Problem solving and feedback are actively practiced. When problems arise, staff are urged to express their feelings openly, using nonaccusatory statements.

Retention is more likely if staff members are placed in the most appropriate positions for their experience, training, and interests. "We get the right people then we put them in the right seats on the bus," according to Spravzoff. When someone has gotten on the wrong bus, the job is to help that person "get off our bus and onto another one." Not firing someone is an action; "if we don't do it, we retain negative energy in the workplace," said Spravzoff. Realizing the effects of employee dissatisfaction or poor performance on workplace morale, staff members generally are supportive of management's decisions to let an employee go.

Even the best seat on the bus might not be comfortable forever. One antidote is a policy of promotion from within. Management believes that every employee needs continual growth opportunities and tries to ensure that there is a slot in the department to which each can aspire. All staff have opportunities for travel and training.

The department has a work flow team that develops the work schedule and negotiates any adjustments that need to be made in it. Flexibility is important. Taking time for family is encouraged, as are schedule adjustments that are needed to accommodate child care and other personal needs. Pharmacists are encouraged to participate in departmental and hospitalwide committees.

Tangible and intangible awards also create good feelings. Oral thank yous are encouraged, as are written notes. Staff can earn cash bonuses as well as small rewards such as free movie tickets. The department sponsors onsite barbecues, it gives each employee a handheld computer, it pays the registration fees for technicians who take the national certification exam, and it reimburses staff for membership in professional associations. These things do cost money. Compared with the cost of recruitment and training, however, the expense is minimal.

Summary

The pharmacy workplace is dynamic. Today's successful strategy might be less effective tomorrow. It's essential to be proactive.