





Attracting and Retaining Qualified Employees in a Competitive Hiring Environment

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain causes of the recent increase in employment attrition
2. Identify ways to attract qualified applicants
3. Discuss how to improve employee retention

“Sign, sign, everywhere a sign,” the lyrics from a popular 1971 song by the Five Man Electric Band, seem to sum up today’s hiring environment, where businesses across many segments are posting open positions and adopting strategies to increase recruiting and hiring of qualified applicants.

Those seeking employment in the Sterile Processing (SP) profession have many options available. For example, they may become surgical instrumentation or flexible gastrointestinal (GI) endoscope processing technicians or choose to specialize in SP education, where the opportunities widen into mentoring, onboarding and competency verification. SP job seekers may prefer a role that works closely with other departments. Instrument specialists, for example, are frequently the link between the Sterile Processing department (SPD) and Supply Chain Management and are responsible for ordering, managing device manufacturers’ instructions for use (IFU) and serving as the point person for the instrument tracking system.

Many seeking an SP position are looking for a career, not just a job; therefore, healthcare facilities lacking staff mobility and growth opportunities struggle to attract and retain employees. The greater threat to hiring and retaining employees comes from outside the healthcare industry. As labor shortages increase in all business sectors, organizations must reevaluate their hiring and retention strategies. Without a strategy, SP managers will struggle to find and keep qualified applicants, and their departments’ productivity and quality output will suffer. This lesson addresses ways healthcare organizations and SP leaders can stand out in a crowded hiring environment and capture qualified applicants’ attention.

Objective 1: Explain causes of the recent increase in employment attrition

Over the past 18 months, the workforce across virtually all industries has experienced a substantial increase in employee attrition. Employees leave an organization for many reasons,



including resignation, termination, retirement or other reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic brought these changes to the forefront, with many workers citing difficulty in obtaining childcare and others realizing they were unhappy in their careers and wanting a change and better work-life balance. According to McKinsey Research, 40% of workers across the healthcare sector responded that they are considering resigning in the next three to six months. What's more, 53% of employers stated they are experiencing a greater-than-normal voluntary turnover, and this trend is expected to continue for the next six months.¹

Recruiting employees through staffing agencies is on the rise. Even employees who are satisfied with their current job may be persuaded to leave as recruiters contact them directly with attractive compensation and benefit packages that lead them to leave their current employer. Despite these pressures, the top reasons for employees who resign continue to be low pay, lack of opportunities, feeling disrespected, and childcare challenges.² The Human Resources (HR) department should perform exit interviews, and SP managers should be actively engaged with the HR department to discuss why staff members are resigning. Often, resignation arises from reasons beyond the facility's or organization's control; however, there are still other contributing factors to resignations that can be addressed.

Objective 2: Identify ways to attract qualified applicants

SP leaders should develop a strategy to attract qualified applicants. The plan should address hiring pressures stemming from employee shortages, recruiting and the facility's resignation

history. The focus should begin with an employee value proposition (EVP), a statement that provides current and potential employees with the benefits of working in the facility's SPD. The five components of an EVP include compensation, work-life balance, stability, location and respect.³

Healthcare facilities have a mission statement and brand. Even the most casual consumer will see branding and hear taglines that make a facility jump to the forefront of one's mind. This, too, can be utilized to attract potential employees. The EVP demonstrates an organization's commitment to employee satisfaction and retention.

Compensation is comprehensive and includes all wages, benefits and possible or actual bonuses. Generational differences exist within the workforce, and each generation may differ in their views around compensation and benefits and what attracts them to a particular role in the organization. All applicants' perspectives are important, one no more than another, and savvy employers will structure the EVP to be attract the best applicants across a range of generations.

Work-life balance incorporates flexible scheduling, paid time off (PTO), and future retirement benefits. Addressing each piece of the work-life balance equation will increase employee satisfaction across all age groups, and organizations should promote their commitment to work-life balance for employees directly on the career website. Job seekers with children may aim for an employer that offers flexible hours (e.g., if they need to see children off to school, evening hours might be preferred). SP leaders can benefit by asking pointed questions about their work scheduling. Has management recently audited the current scheduling matrix? Are employees held to standard

shifts without concern for the current demographic of job seekers or even when peak times of workflow occur within the department? Flexible scheduling and unconventional scheduling can meet the needs of both the employee and the department when audited to current workflow and needs.

Stability or job security components can include opportunities for career development, training opportunities and mentoring. Tuition reimbursement is important for healthcare workers who want to obtain advanced degrees. Reimbursement for certification training and financial assistance to attend professional conferences are important for personal and professional development and help the employee feel valued. It is important to discuss long-range opportunities with applicants during the interview process.

Location goes beyond the physical place where a job is performed. It is also about a safe and positive work environment, the organization's (and department's) culture, the level of employee autonomy to make decisions regarding how the work is completed or scheduled, and the technology available in the department to make the work more effective, safe and efficient.

Respect fosters diversity and inclusion. Everyone wants to be respected, and what constitutes respect and appreciation may differ across employees and roles. Employees who feel valued, supported and integral to the team often are more satisfied in their roles.

How does one enhance or build an EVP? The first step is creating a candidate persona or profile to determine which qualities are ideal in a candidate. Skills can be taught, but motivation, personality, integrity and goals may vary from one applicant



to another. Leaders should think of the best employees currently in the role, as well as previous employees, and ask which qualities they possess that contributes (or, perhaps, detracts from) the position and team. It is also helpful to ask open-ended interview questions that allow the applicant to formulate a deeper response than yes or no. Departmental leaders should also meet with their HR recruiter frequently to discuss the type of applicants needed for current and prospective job openings. The database can be reset to prescreen the pool of candidates and narrow down elements that would make a successful match for the department.

During the interview phase, encourage a team of current employees to also interview candidates. This can be done before or after the management interview or on a different day. This dual interview technique accomplishes two objectives. First, existing employees can provide insight about the candidate from a unique perspective and share how the candidate assimilates with the other team members. This interview approach also helps demonstrate that management values the opinions of current employees. Further, SP leaders should plan for a tour of the department during the interview to allow a job candidate who is unfamiliar with the SP profession to see what the role entails. If the applicant is already familiar with the profession and all that is involved, seeing up-to-date equipment and a clean, modern and well-organized department can be a significant selling point.

Another way to attract qualified applicants is through an employee referral program, which can generate excellent candidate leads from within the organization. Current employees who enjoy their position, stand with the

corporate culture and appreciate having a voice in selecting their new co-workers are often the best recruiters.

Objective 3: Discuss how to improve employee retention

A new employee's first impression of their new employer will come from their onboarding and orientation experience. Does the organization have a formal orientation process, or does everyone just wing it? Having a set schedule for all new hires alleviates anxiety. When an employee knows what to expect, they are prepared to tackle new challenges. When they are randomly assigned training based upon SP's daily gaps, the experience may not be ideal, and training may be inadequate.

Preceptors should complete evaluation forms and participate in weekly meetings to discuss the evaluations and overall process with each new hire. Consider pairing new staff members with a mentor who is not the preceptor. A mentor helps the new hire navigate the departmental culture, is a safe person to share information and provides as-needed feedback. This departmental "buddy" allows for a broader introduction to the department and positions another staff member to step in if the initial preceptor is unavailable to complete the orientation objectives.


Leaders should also strive to help employees grow professionally. They should seek employees with untapped leadership abilities and provide opportunities to develop a solid mix of skills. They should also ask staff members where they see themselves in five or 10 years and actively map out how leadership can help achieve those goals. Meeting at assigned intervals to verify progress toward the goals remains active and in a forward direction is prudent because goals might change along the way (this

is acceptable because it means the employee is developing).

SP leaders should also look for signs of employee burnout. Changes in an employee's behavior and output could suggest they are no longer satisfied in their role. While factors outside the work environment may contribute to errors, absenteeism or other outcomes, open communication can proactively address root causes, identify solutions and reduce the risk of termination or resignation.

Recognition is a public display of respect. Recognizing contributions an employee has made to the department and team creates a sense of belonging and appreciation. Recognition can include verbal recognition during staff meetings or handwritten thank-you notes for a job well done.⁴ A gift card, movie tickets and preferred parking are other options leaders can adopt for employee recognition. Personalized approaches to employee recognition are preferred. Managers should listen to employees when they share interests such as hobbies, favorite restaurant and so on—and managers should be open to asking employees what recognition means to them. When a birthday or work anniversary arrives, leaders can use this information to acknowledge the event in a more personal way.

Conclusion

Employee turnover and rapidly changing work environments will likely not slow soon. SP leaders must develop a solid strategy for hiring and retaining employees to navigate post-pandemic employee shortages. Focusing on employee needs and experiences will help build a strong department that will lead to greater staff satisfaction, productivity, camaraderie and outcomes. 

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