Reducing Turnover as a Key Outcome of Clinical Workforce Management Software

Executive Summary

A very real workforce shortage exists within the clinical laboratory industry. Staff turnover generates high costs across the board, creates inefficiency, and slows down operational initiatives.

Reducing staff turnover in these highly-skilled positions remains crucial to the ongoing success of any laboratory. Clinical Workforce Management Software offers solutions that lead to increases in morale and job satisfaction – and ultimately help to reduce turnover.

Background

Perhaps no other issue has gripped the clinical laboratory industry like the ongoing staff shortage and a rapidly retiring workforce. Since the mid 1970's, many training programs for Clinical Laboratory Scientists (CLS or MT) have closed, dropping the number of graduates by two-thirds over the course of thirty years.[1] Baby-boomer CLS's are retiring with percentages in the double digits, and supervisor retirement rates are running at about double those rates.[2,3]

To be sure, there have been increases in efficiencies, improvements in technology, and a greater acceptance of the Technician (MLT) role in the laboratory. Nonetheless, these gains are not keeping up with the rate of people leaving the field.

Problem Statement

For any laboratory, staff retention remains a critical, ongoing objective. Retaining staff not only keeps seats on the bench full, but it also maintains staff effectiveness.

Ask yourself how many months it takes for a new technologist to become fully trained – three? six? nine? Are your staff rotating benches or departments? Perhaps twelve months is more

realistic? Regardless of your lab's structure, if one technologist leaves, you face months of training and relative inefficiency before returning to some sense of "normal".

Laboratory management needs to reduce turnover, but how? Increasing pay seems an obvious answer – and it does help for a period of time. Some HR leaders refer to this effect as the "three-month rule" - job satisfaction seems to improve for roughly three months after a pay increase.

Regardless of the timeframe where increased job satisfaction is noted, lab leaders consistently agree the effect is short-lived.[4,5,21] Quite quickly, the affected employees consider the new rate of pay to be the "new normal", and any underlying problems, issues or stresses will rear their heads once again.

Now, your lab is back where you started – and your costs have increased.

A Culture of Frustration

Reducing turnover will likely come about through honestly addressing problems in the management of the laboratory. Lab leaders determined to Increase morale and improve job satisfaction will likely experience decreased turnover in their labs.

Some of the underlying, more complex problems needing attention could be difficult and uncomfortable to address. Some most likely will involve change and hard conversations. Crucial Conversations[6] is an excellent resource for handling some of the situations that might arise.

Other problems, while seemingly mundane, can play a key role in job satisfaction and ultimately, in retention. These are the irritations that grind away

at morale and drag a single department or an entire organization down.

Think culture keywords like *fairness, transparency, visibility, and accessibility:*

- Benches that start out unstaffed due to a scheduling oversight – or end up double-staffed
- Leave requests that get lost or are not responded to in a timely fashion
- Leave requests decisions that are not perceived as fair and consistent
- Outreach draw stations that go unstaffed
- Competency assessments that go uncompleted – or get lost in the paper shuffle and must be repeated
- Citations for deficiencies – again
- Policies and procedures missing critical signatures...and staff that don't complete reading tasks on time
- Manuals that end up locked in the supervisor's office when they are needed the most
- ...and manuals that are missing key pages

Wait – People Don't Quit Jobs; They Quit Bad Bosses, Right?

We've all heard that cliché before. Turns out it's not quite true. People leave jobs for any number of reasons, but they generally are not "pay" and "the boss". [7,8,9,10] Work that is frustrating and work that does not utilize staff potential lead the list. Close behind is organizational culture.

Laboratory staff enter their professions for specific reasons. They thrive in the technical environment, they enjoy the challenge of putting all the pieces together to solve a problem, and they have a desire to be a part of healthcare and helping people. They did not sign up for frustration and mis-management.

Cost of Turnover

The cost to replace one position is estimated to run 20 – 50% the annual cost of the position.[11,12] This agrees with the findings of the 2018 ASCP Salary survey, which shows the time to fill a position averages 3-6 months for a CLS position, and 3-12 months for a supervisor.[3] Some sources put the number even higher at up to two times annual salary.[13,14]

With the average annual salary of a bench CLS position at about $68,000[15] and that of a manager at around $86,000[15], a laboratory could easily be looking at between $13,600 on the low end and $172,000 on the high side of completely avoidable labor expenses. If you keep in mind these costs are *per vacancy*, then the sums become truly staggering.

(If you're interested in calculating your own cost to refill a position, this short but excellent article by Josh Berlin lays out several items to consider.[14])

Automation has changed the face of laboratory analysis. Why should the work of managing a laboratory be any different?

Solution

Enter Clinical Workforce Management Software.

Lab leadership has waited too long for tools to bring control, transparency and automation to the processes around managing staff.

For decades, significant strides have been made in automating laboratory testing and analysis. Lab staff are now used to and expect advanced technical tools and equipment that make their jobs easier, their work more efficient and test results more accurate.

Until recently, these same advances have not been recognized on the operational side of the laboratory business even though regulations and oversight in laboratories has significantly increased.

Lab management staff still frequently depend on paper, binders, spreadsheets and shared drives to manage complex operations related to scheduling, competency assessment and document management as well as inspection preparation.

Fortunately today, solutions now exist.

Clinical Workforce Management Software provides not only automation for management but promotes an environment of fairness and transparency, addressing some of the most critical issues related to retention and turnover:

- Schedules that can be viewed at home or on a mobile device
- Leave requests that are timestamped and have an iron-clad approval and notification process
- Competency assessments that are scheduled in advance and tracked throughout the year
- Competency assessments that allow for scheduling based upon skill and readiness for a specific test system, bench or department
- Required documents that get reviewed, approved and read on time...
- ... and remain available in an on-line library.

Automation did change the face of laboratory analysis. Now, labs can automate operational management as well.

Conclusion

Removing workplace frustrations, improving morale, and reducing turnover are bit like a cornerstone rule of backpacking – "Mind your ounces and the pounds take care of themselves."

Successful laboratories of the future – labs that address the root issues of high turnover - will focus on top-line issues such as employee satisfaction and morale, staff advancement and training, and organizational culture.

They'll avoid the knee-jerk, quick fix of providing raises that don't solve long-term issues.

Those laboratories will need tools to help them achieve those goals.

Fortunately, Clinical Workforce Management Software exists today to help innovative labs achieve their goals and chart a new course. Turnover doesn't have to be the story in every lab, but labs that succeed will be labs that adapt and address these challenges with new ideas and the tools to support them.

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> Amy Rogers,
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