



REGIONALIZATION OF HUMAN RESOURCES

At times the U.S. healthcare equation seems irreconcilably out of balance: increasing demands from an aging, often underinsured public on a burdened system hindered by ever-diminishing resources. Never before has it been so crucial for healthcare organizations to try to meet those needs by instilling visionary leadership today and establishing long-range strategies for tomorrow.

Effective human resource strategies are one area important to facilities' long-range success. Healthcare organizations must recruit and retain exceptional, values-oriented professionals who will carry out the healing mission into the next century. Creative human resource procedures are vital to the facility's viability.

ESTABLISHING REGIONALIZATION

How do healthcare facilities plan for near-future demands, keep existing services staffed, and anticipate needs far into the twenty-first century? The Sisters of Charity Health Care Systems (SCHCS), Cincinnati, is accomplishing these goals by creating a comprehensive approach to the following human resource challenges:

- Retaining current employees
- Attracting new talent
- Nurturing the allied health professionals of tomorrow

The underlying tenet of the SCHCS program is collaborative regionalization. This formal pro-



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SCHCS Healthcare Facilities Collaborate To Head Off Labor Shortages

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gram, devised to promote synergies among SCHCS members, began in late 1988. In addition to developing a more integrated continuum of care on local and regional bases, regionalization helps members avoid duplication of services and ensures communities' future access to care by spreading financial risk among partners.

Within such a supportive framework, human resource professionals in each SCHCS member organization can extend their reach into the worker marketplace by using pooled resources, shared expertise, and unified leverage.

Summary Shortages of healthcare personnel become more pronounced each year. Effective human resource strategies are therefore important to facilities' success. The Sisters of Charity Health Care Systems (SCHCS), Cincinnati, is meeting the labor shortage head-on through collaborative regionalization among its facilities.

Regionalization develops an integrated continuum of care on local and regional bases, helps SCHCS members avoid duplication of services, and ensures communities' future access to care by spreading financial risk among partners.

SCHCS human resource personnel encourage employees to stay within the organization if they must relocate or are looking for career advancement. Members use a systemwide brochure to recruit nurses and allied health professionals. To attract employees from outside SCHCS, human resource personnel join forces at trade association conferences, job fairs, and school career days.

SCHCS human resource personnel recruit and select values-oriented employees. Values-based human resource guidelines provide a framework for SCHCS members to assess how effectively the core values and mission are demonstrated in policies, programs, procedures, behaviors, and culture.



The regionalization model reflects the SCHCS presence in three states: Colorado, Nebraska, and Ohio. Human resource managers from these three areas have begun to plan regional and systems recruitment and retention efforts. The costs of solving human resource problems seem minimal compared with the bottom-line costs of shutting down units and curtailing services.

RETAINING EMPLOYEES

Retaining employees is at least as important as attracting new ones. Through the exit interview process, SCHCS human resource managers have found that the key factor in retaining healthcare professionals is a work environment that promotes good relationships with supervisors and co-workers. In fact, workers place more value on good relationships than on salary. Recognizing the importance of an organization's culture and its impact on retaining employees, we are focusing on continuous improvement of the work environment. This goal challenges us to assess the cultural environment.

An employee opinion survey is a good tool for assessing the work culture and for devising improvements, but it is expensive. Most facilities cannot afford to spend \$30,000 to \$40,000 on a survey. So SCHCS is now developing a systems-wide employee survey program that each facility can use to gain important workplace insights, while reducing the costs associated with outside consultants or products.

Retention of employees can be extended beyond the walls of one organization or even one geographic area. When employees believe it is time to move on (either for career advancement or relocation with a spouse), human resource personnel encourage them to transfer within SCHCS. Employees who stay within SCHCS retain service credit for many of their benefits,

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including insurance, vacation, and pension.

The benefits of belonging to a system include sharing ideas and resources. SCHCS Colorado members are collaborating on a referral program for an in-house operating room training program. This program already has helped one hospital fill vacancies from its own staff.

In addition, SCHCS has a brochure to recruit nurses and allied health professionals among member facilities. We are developing an internal job newsletter that will be mailed directly to employees at the director level and above. We have also discussed the effect and feasibility of having regional recruiters on staff at the systems level to assist member organizations.

After recruitment, human resource personnel strive to enhance employee retention through the use of values-based human resource guidelines. These guidelines, developed in conjunction with the SCHCS Mission Effectiveness Department, provide a framework for SCHCS members to assess how effectively the core values and mission are demonstrated in a facility's human resource policies, programs, procedures, managers' behaviors, and culture. The guidelines address such issues as orientation of human resource personnel, benefit levels and eligibility, and ways to help employees balance work and family life. With values-based human resource practices evidenced in the workplace, employees tend to be more fulfilled professionally and less likely to leave for a position elsewhere.

RECRUITING VALUES-ORIENTED EMPLOYEES

SCHCS human resource managers have gone one step further in their ongoing efforts to recruit and select values-oriented employees systems-wide. Since SCHCS recognizes that first impressions are important and long-lasting for both the interviewer and candidate, it recommended that member organizations integrate key elements in recruitment and selection processes to enhance the candidate's impression of SCHCS and to maximize the interviewer's evaluation of the candidate (see **Box**, left).

SCHCS human resource managers are learning from employees who began working at SCHCS facilities during the past year. We ask them how they found the facility and why they chose to work at an SCHCS organization. Their responses are surprising. For example, professionals who want to relocate will look in the telephone directory or ask the city's chamber of commerce for employer and hospital listings. They then call the hospitals and interview with each one. This is contrary to the perception that using professional agencies to attract employees is advantageous. SCHCS has found that many professionals join

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION TIPS

- Review recruitment and selection processes and materials (e.g., job postings and ads) with the candidate to ensure he or she understands the SCHCS mission and values integration.
- Teach human resource personnel, the receptionist, and the interview team the importance of treating applicants with courtesy and respect.
 - Familiarize the interviewing team with the position's requirements.
 - Provide interviewers with sample questions to help them evaluate a candidate's understanding and compatibility with the SCHCS values-based work culture.
 - Ensure all candidates receive formal and timely communications about the hiring decision and receipt and status of their application.



member organizations because of their image as values-based organizations.

In issues of staffing, human resource managers often overlook the facility's own personnel, and they can be the organization's most valuable resource. The more than 17,000 SCHCS employees form a tremendous referral bank. Employees can help us expand the search network by referring potential employees from among former classmates or co-workers. Many SCHCS member organizations have initiated programs to compensate employees who nominate professionals who join the staff.

SCHCS members, in their respective regions, have regional recruitment and retention committees that concentrate on the vacancies for which no SCHCS transferees are available. Regional human resource managers brainstorm regularly on ways to extend their recruitment efforts on tighter budgets.

The managers discuss what they have tried and what has succeeded and failed. They have developed ways to work together to save costs. Instead of each facility sending recruiters to national conferences, schools, or job fairs, for instance, they are now combining efforts and sending fewer representatives. In addition, SCHCS member hospitals in Colorado sponsored a hospitality suite at the annual conference of the American Physical Therapy Association held in Denver last June. Administrative, human resource, and physical therapy representatives from the hospitals answered questions and provided information on physical therapy careers at their facilities. Although the ultimate success of this first-time, joint recruitment effort remains to be determined, its immediate success is evidenced in the commitment made to explore other human resource collaboration opportunities such as employee retention, recruitment, and education.

PREPARING FOR TOMORROW

No matter what SCHCS facilities do to make their employment positions more attractive, they continue struggling to attract trained professionals. However, an even more important issue is how to fill the pipeline for tomorrow.

How can SCHCS member facilities get high school students interested in physical therapy and pharmacy? The facilities need to build a support system for students, both financially and personally. Pooling SCHCS resources to focus on high school students is the most critical thing the organization can do to fulfill tomorrow's allied healthcare staffing needs.

The human resource staff at St. Mary-Corwin, Pueblo, CO, have developed a two-pronged education program. In one segment, human resource

THE COST OF LABOR SHORTAGES

Unfilled positions can mean huge revenue losses. One SCHCS member organization in Colorado tracked the costs of allied health professional shortages in 1991. It found:

- To cover physical therapy services, the hospital paid \$36,000 (over and above the position's regular salary) for a contract professional.
- The hospital lost revenue of approximately \$149,000 for services not performed because of a staff shortage.
- Hiring outside agency nurses added more than \$200,000 to the standard budgeted compensations.
- A shortage of intensive care unit nurses cost \$120,000 in gross lost revenue because the hospital had to send potential patients to other facilities.

Beyond these figures, the loss of continuity and a long learning curve are just two of the intangible costs from labor shortfalls.

SSCHCS has found that many professionals join member organizations because of their image as values-based organizations.

personnel meet with science teachers to make them more aware of opportunities in healthcare. They use speakers, films, and materials on nursing and the allied healthcare professions from cardiac rehabilitation and respiratory therapy to medical records and laboratory technicians.

About three years ago, the St. Mary-Corwin human resource team also began meeting with junior high school students and introducing them to allied health careers. St. Mary-Corwin human resource personnel talk to students before they decide what career path they will follow, since the younger they become interested in healthcare, the better they can prepare themselves through high school. The staff also point to the projected labor shortages and tell students they will not have to worry about finding a job.

In the next two years, SCHCS will focus on introducing high school students to healthcare opportunities. In addition, SCHCS is exploring ways to help students finance their college education in exchange for service at a member facility after graduation.

MAINTAINING STEWARDSHIP

SCHCS leaders consider regionalization a stewardship function, helping members maximize resources, reduce costs, increase market share, and position the organization for managed care opportunities. In addition to recruitment, human resource collaboration can effect economies of scale, from discounted corporate advertising rates in professional journals to group contracts for relocation fees from moving companies. Unleashing the system's synergies through regionalization and creative new approaches is a major step toward building the skilled, dedicated healthcare work force of the twenty-first century. □