

Obviate personnel-shortage problems using lab orientation to retain essential support staff

By Bob Page

North Shore Medical Center (NSMC) Laboratory in Salem, MA, is blessed with a very stable workforce of medical technologists (MTs). The turnover of licensed staff over the past several years has been under 3% annually and the average vacancy rate is 2% — this in a region where double-digit vacancy rates of licensed staff are not uncommon. Because NSMC runs a large laboratory-outreach program, over 65% of staff members are support and not medical technologists. While MTs are the heart of the lab, without good support services that heart does not beat as strongly as it should. In the area of support staff, the laboratory struggled with annual turnover in phlebotomy, lab assistants, client services, and couriers, somewhere north of 30%. Even worse, more than a quarter of those were turning over in the first 90 days. Clearly, when it comes to job satisfaction, one size was not fitting all.

When someone joins an organization, he usually makes up his mind whether the new environment is a good fit for him long before the arbitrary 90-day point. Nothing is more frustrating for both manager and staff when a new employee does not work out during the introductory or probationary period. In fact, 25% of all new employees who take healthcare positions leave within the first 90 days with not only a dollar cost to the organization but also, and more importantly, damage to staff morale. Everyone loses in these situations.

Since retention was a problematic issue at North Shore Medical Center, its management team decided to take a different approach since, obviously, that first 90 days is a critical time for a new laboratory staff member. Any new employee, regardless of experience level, is going to

be operating at the lower end of his new learning curve. Every experience he has — good or bad — is going to be magnified as he finds his way in a new environment. NSMC managers realized that the coordination of the first 90 days of a new staff member's work experience had to focus not only how he *received* his technical training but also how he *perceived* his new work environment. They understood that they needed to monitor that employee's training as well as his perceptions at the 30-, 60-, and 90-day marks.

Choose the right person

The first area NSMC examined was the quality of the selection process. Management decided to take a behavioral approach to interviewing, a major shift in method for most personnel involved. With the help of their department of human resources (HR), all NSMC managers and supervisors concerned with selecting new staff attended a one-day training class on behavioral interviewing. The class consisted of an informative lecture, followed by role-playing, and then questions and answers.

The goal of a behavioral interview is to reveal a candidate's behavioral tendencies in those areas that an organization deems important for long-term success. Interviewers typically ask job applicants to describe a situation in which there was a task or goal to be accomplished. The candidate is then expected to describe the action he took to get results. The interview's focus is more on a candidate's behavioral traits than on his technical talents, a philosophy supported by the rationale that skills can be taught and/or improved but a person's behavior is accumulated during a lifetime of learning from varied experiences. Be-

havior, therefore, is not easily corrected by policy, procedure, or training.

Laboratory orientation redesign

Most hospitals run a general orientation for new personnel to facilitate communicating details about anything from employee benefits to parking permits. The new employee generally goes directly from this orientation class to learning the technical aspects of his new job. Though the orientation is important, the fact is that a new staff member still needs to get comfortable with functioning at the most basic level of his new position.

Following the shift to behavioral interviewing, NSMC's management group set out to improve the orientation process and design a new program for the laboratory. The purpose was to give all staff members — specifically support staff that may have never worked in a laboratory — a good laboratory-wide department orientation before they actually started training in their specific jobs. The upgraded orientation was spread over several days with new hires spending time shadowing a staff member in each laboratory department. In this scenario, the new staff member gets a basic understanding of what each department does as well as becomes acquainted with the personnel in that department. After the completion of the new laboratory orientation, the results seemed to indicate that employees who experienced the new orientation process exhibited a much greater comfort level than those who had not.

Employee packet; monthly check backs

Once the introductory lab-department rotation is completed, the new staff member gets a "new-employee packet." The

LAB RETENTION

packet contains an orientation checklist for those things all employees must know about each department, including the most common tests, the major instruments, the most common reason for specimen rejection, and staff members' names. There is a map with locations of the entire campus and instructions on where to find mouse pads, letter openers, pens, and other supplies. Hospital and laboratory information systems' access forms; self-study guides on lab privacy and security of health information; information on lab compliance services; and a confidentiality agreement are also enclosed. Several "quick reference" guides to various sets of instructions are available, along with a safety-orientation checklist and quizzes on lab infection control, chemical hygiene and safety, and fire safety. Management must monitor these quizzes, which are required of all laboratory staff within the first 30 days of employment. The packet is a helpful tool for new staff members to keep in their lockers for reference as they become more established in their new positions and may soon contain information regarding the historic Salem area around the hospital where local restaurants abound.

The next vital component of NSMC's improved employee-retention program was the creation of key conversations between managers and new staff members throughout the introductory period. These meetings were scheduled at 30, 60, and 90 days. Managers ask a set of carefully developed questions in order to check an employee's view of his first 90 days on a month-by-month basis. Questions were designed to ascertain information: In what ways did NSMC's presentation of your job at your interview coincide with what you have experienced during your first few weeks? "Yes" and "no" questions were avoided. Through direct early feedback, NSMC's managers with support from their HR department can attempt to identify adjustment issues and training gaps early in a new employee's tenure and make corrections, if possible.

Approximately every six weeks the new-employee lab orientation continues when key members of management conduct a four-hour presentation on a particular phase of the laboratory quality-management program. This segment of

the orientation sets department expectations and also demonstrates to new staff members how they fit into the department and contribute to its success. If any new staff member does not complete all parts of the upgraded laboratory orientation, the appropriate manager(s) must assist him in finishing the process to guarantee 100% completion. The lab monitors compliance, and the results are reported to the NSMC Laboratory Quality Improvement Team.



Beyond implementation

To summarize, NSMC has implemented a series of steps to enhance new-employee retention in its laboratory, which includes:

- choosing the right person for the job through behavioral interviewing;
- conducting an in-laboratory orientation rotation;
- distributing a new-employee packet with pertinent reference information;
- managers conversing at 30, 60, and 90 days with new employees about employee satisfaction; and
- offering ongoing laboratory quality-management presentations.

Though the NSMC program is less than a year old and although its results to date show an excellent response from new personnel, the effectiveness of this approach will be further proven in lower annual turnover results. NSMC's goal is to reduce support-staff turnover from 35% down to less than 20%. With the addition of this new-employee orientation process and other staff initiatives, another goal is also to enhance efforts to keep the laboratory's medical technologist vacancy rate low, since it is always better in all cases to retain top performers than to recruit and train new staff. □

Bob Page is administrative director of Laboratory Services at North Shore Medical Center in Salem, MA.

10% bleach protocol...



simplified!

Eliminates daily

- Mixing
- Measuring
- Labeling
- Dating
- Spilling
- Wasting

***Because your staff has
better things to do!***

ACTIVATE™
**BLEACH DILUTION
SYSTEM**



deardorff fitzsimmons corporation
www.activatebleach.com
1-888-582-2700

Visit www.rsleads.com/703ml-016