Recruiting for the future of the clinical laboratory

By Bill Lemons

For those who have worked in a scientific laboratory, there are several critical success factors. These include technology, facilities, processes, funding, and people. With all things being reasonably equal, the greatest differentiator is the skilled personnel who work in the laboratory. Most lab personnel are probably familiar with surveys and articles about current shortages as well as the projected shortfalls for the future.

Good information is available from a number of sources, including ASCP, ASCLS, and others. A summary of all that information shows that there are a number of trends that are affecting the employment market.

The three most prevalent trends include:

- An aging laboratory workforce is starting to retire;
- Young people do not choose clinical laboratory science (CLS) as a career; and
- Automation and a proliferation of new technology and diagnostic tests demand new skills but fewer people.

More trends can be listed, but this review will present ways to navigate through the rough waters of recruiting and retaining the very best people possible. Let us start with the aging workforce (or “boomers”) and address ways to ameliorate the toll that their retirement will bring.

The aging workforce

The retirement effect may not be as severe as commonly believed. There are two factors that might counteract the growing retirement rate. First, many people are happier staying active and working beyond retirement age. Second, many Americans do not have large enough pensions or savings to even think about retirement. Those are solid reasons to consider ways to retain these people. The added bonus is that they possess high levels of skill and knowledge acquired from training and many years of professional employment. Couple that with the good citizenship and work ethic they bring. That begs the question, “What can we do to retain the ‘experienced’ personnel?”

Before applying any specific remedy, a critical factor to consider in retaining talent is to provide an invigorated environment where people want to come to work. By definition, laboratory operation is a task-oriented environment — but not at the exclusion of concern for the personnel. That being said, flexibility and creativity will be required to retain “boomer” talent. Consider reduced hours, job sharing, or accessing “boomers” through a specialty temp-staffing agency. Maintain a pool of talent that you can call at varying degrees of frequency.

Whether they want to work or need to work, “boomers” salary requirements may be less than earlier in their professional lives (i.e., no mortgage, children out of college). Some may already be receiving Social Security or drawing a pension. And face it; there is considerable payback in terms of training costs when experienced lab technologists are on the scene.

Young people just do not know about CLS

At the other end of the career spectrum are the young people. Science and math do not attract the number of students they once did. That means it is harder to find talent with the adequate skill levels. Young people overlook clinical laboratory science as the viable career it is. Some of the problem is due to a lack of exposure in high school. Prospective students are likely to select nursing over CLS because of greater visibility and a higher pay rate.

There are many students around the nation, however, who are getting biomedical and life-science degrees. They have a love for science but do not seem to be aware of CLS as an alternative. Lisa Austin, a scientific recruiter with Kelly Scientific Resources (Irving, TX) is a great example. While she was still working on her four-year biology degree, she sought guidance from her college counselor regarding career options. After graduation, she decided to continue her education with a fifth year to get a second degree in clinical laboratory science. Her year consisted of 40-hour weeks of lectures, laboratory classes, and a hospital clinical-lab rotation. She then launched her career working in a medical laboratory for a few years. Her story is evidence that there are lots of curr...
rent students or those with recent degrees who have not been reached by our industry.

To encourage new entries into the field, labs should work with local professional organizations like the American Society of Clinical Laboratory Science, the American Association of Clinical Chemistry, and the Clinical Laboratory Management Association, and others to support initiatives to reach high-school and college students and provide them with seminars, job shadowing, and other information about careers.

Another alternative is to sponsor an internship program where college students are brought into the laboratory for a summer to give them in-depth exposure. This can be achieved either directly or through a specialty temp-staffing agency. Because labs are competing with other institutions for the best and brightest, develop and continue to nurture relationships with the schools that educate clinical laboratory scientists. Be mindful that these are long-term solutions with no immediate results.

Automation and technology: additional skills, fewer people, more tests

Spectacular technology in medical laboratories serves to minimize much of the tedium. Automation reduces labor needs but demands a wider degree of skill sets and a very high degree of knowledge and understanding of how the instrumentation operates. Clinical laboratory scientists are becoming more involved with quality control and compliance tasks, and are not as tied to the bench. Even so, there is a growing number of diagnostic tests that laboratories are performing, and a growing number that are designed as point-of-care tests, avoiding the laboratory all together.

Clinical laboratory scientists add a very tangible value to everyone’s life and health.

What the future holds

People are, and will continue to be in the foreseeable future, the differentiating factor that makes a good laboratory great. Because science and technology are proliferating, their impact is that new and more varied skill sets will be in demand and many careers options are going to be available. The industry must be vigilant in reaching high-school and college students and providing them with the information they need to make career choices. Wages may need to increase to be competitive with nursing, as well as other industries.

Clinical laboratory scientists add a very tangible value to everyone’s life and health. It is too easy for the general public to take for granted the great service this industry provides. Without it, many diagnoses are impossible. Clearly, for the healthcare consumer, it will only get better. While no one can predict the future — other than to say it will be exciting and provide a better quality of life for all of us — it will mean excellent careers for many young people, most of whom have yet to even consider clinical laboratory science.

Let us go and tell them about it.

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