



HR's Current State

Our Role in Quality and Patient Safety

By Michael DiPietro

Quality and patient safety was front and center in 2008 when ASHHRA convened its Thought Leader Forum on *The Role of Health Care HR in Quality and Patient Safety*. The forum covered a wide range of issues from challenges to quality and safety, to workforce, and leadership engagement.

The summary of findings¹ from the forum offered a collection of action ideas that include a laundry list of goals, activities and programs in the following areas:

- Engagement and recognition
- Communication
- Work transformation and skills development
- Culture, motivation, and commitment
- Strategic leadership.

What's Changed?

Fast-forward from 2008 to the present day, it's fair to say that while much has changed, much remains the same. The last three years have brought many changes, most significantly health reform legislation and a worldwide economic recession. While health care's mandate to 'do more with less' impacts all departments, the HR department is directly chartered with engineering hospital talent to support patient satisfaction and safety initiatives.

The Health Care HR Initiatives Survey

Health care HR's role in quality and patient safety is clearly articulated in the 2011 Healthcare HR Initiatives Survey², co-sponsored by talent management software vendor HealthcareSource and ASHHRA.

Peter Segall, president and CEO at HealthcareSource, described the survey's

purpose. "Daunting challenges and the broad swath of changes and issues facing health care providers make it harder than ever to achieve three age-old strategic goals – reduce costs, improve patient safety, improve patient satisfaction. This survey introduces health care HR professionals to best practices, and helps compare themselves with peers, so they can focus their future efforts on the more important initiatives," he said.

The Current State of HR's Role

We can get a good take on the current state of HR's role in quality and patient safety by examining the survey results.

I. What are your HR initiatives to improve patient satisfaction?

Top responses:

- Improve employee satisfaction/employee engagement **75%**
- Create a culture of employee accountability **75%**
- Create a service-oriented culture **72%**
- Align our workforce with our organization's mission and core values **64%**

These initiatives are all related to each other and tend to be among the more strategic of HR initiatives that gain the attention of senior management. Recently, the transparency of Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) scores has created increased focus on patient satisfaction, resulting in senior management putting even more pressure on HR to hire and develop employees who are service-oriented. It also puts a renewed

focus on employee satisfaction, which many see as highly correlated with patient satisfaction.

II. What are your HR initiatives to improve patient safety?

Top responses:

- Improve workforce education and development **67%**
- Improve employee satisfaction **60%**
- Identify and manage out low performers **59%**
- Improve retention rates **49%**

Quality of care has always been the #1 goal for a health care organization. More recently, the focus is on patient safety, driven in part by the landmark 2002 CDC Report, *Estimating Healthcare Associated Infections and Deaths in U.S. Hospitals*,³ estimating that nearly 100,000 deaths occur from hospital acquired conditions, and more recently CMS's change in reimbursement policy and measurement of HACs. It's intuitive that patient safety is affected directly by the competency of the workforce and the influence of an organization's culture. It reasons that HR has a large part in impacting patient safety.

In fact, the AHA research paper, *Using Workforce Practices to Drive Patient Safety*⁴ cites the need for 'Practices that ensure all employees' awareness, understanding, and personal stake in the organization's vision, including its current level of success in pursuing that vision.' Participants in the 2011 HR Initiatives Survey specifically cited the need to involve employees in key decisions, and track and reward performance.

The #2 and #3 top patient safety initiatives, *Improving Employee Satisfaction and Identifying and Managing out Low Performers*, were activities in which a majority of respondents are involved. Improving communications throughout the organization was seen as a key component for success. Two respondents described their communications programs²:

Connie Knox, talent acquisition management recruiter, Coliseum Health System:

"We are in the process of creating a "FRESH FEEDBACK" luncheon for all new hires after their first 45 days of employment to give them an open forum to give their feedback and to ask questions."

Tracy Brown, director of HR, Lakeland HealthCare:

"We have transitioned the organization to one of a high performance culture and our HR organization is focused to be a strategic business partner driving this culture. Last year, in lieu of performance evaluations, we had high performance conversations. We are rewarding the high performers and moving the lows up or out of the organization."

III. What new technology are you planning to adopt in 2011/2012 to support your HR initiatives?

Top responses:

Performance management (appraisal) software **36%**
 Social Media for recruiting **32%**
 Time and Attendance/Workforce Scheduling/Absence **24%**
 Behavioral Assessments **24%**

Respondents gave high ratings to performance management software, which automates the employee appraisal, goals, and feedback process. This software creates a more-structured and disciplined process for having discussions with employees on performance and their impact on patient safety and satisfaction. Likewise, workforce management software, for time and attendance, scheduling, and absenteeism, identifies issues and helps support employee accountability. Developing a workforce that is engaged, accountable, service-oriented, and is aligned with organizational core values starts with hiring the right people. Respondents noted that using social media for recruiting was a

key initiative, as a way to expand the talent pool and leverage relationships that they develop with potential employees online.

Also of note was the significant number of health care HR professionals planning to use behavioral assessments

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during the recruiting process. Behavioral assessments help identify candidates who "fit" an organization's culture and have the behavioral competencies the employer seeks. Both are difficult to assess from an interview alone.

Affinity Health System sets an excellent example of technology best practices for enhanced quality. Kari Peters, recruiting specialist at Affinity Health, detailed the arsenal of HR software systems currently in operation:

"To ensure our employees have an affinity for quality care, we're doing all we can as an organization to create strong teams of exceptional individuals. In fulfillment of that, we're already using the following technologies: social media for recruitment, eLearning modules, online reference checks, and software for performance management and succession planning systems. Recently, we launched a 'New Hire Hub' that provides new employees with all the onboarding information they need through a portal from our external website."⁶

Engagement...Communication... Development...Culture...Leadership

These themes remain front of mind for health care HR leaders today just as they were at the 2008 ASHHRA Thought Leader Forum.

At the same time, new imperatives for accountability and patient-rated care are driving new initiatives and improvements. Now, through new behavioral assessments and video interviewing capabilities, hospitals can better hire for fit. Similarly, best practices such as those to streamline processes, set performance benchmarks, measure metrics over time, and foster learning, are all on the "Must Do" lists of today's hospital HR departments.

Words from the Summary of Findings from the 2008 ASHHRA Thought Leader

Forum still ring true today by describing today's HR leaders as: "senior management's greatest resource for building value in health care, and assuring that employees have the communication resources and tools they need to deliver superior quality and patient safety."⁷

The Bottom Line

As health care moves to an accountable care model, with reimbursements tied to patient satisfaction and patient safety, with even greater pressure on costs containment, health care providers are focusing on talent management initiatives to align their workforce with these challenging changes. Health care providers cannot reduce costs and improve patient satisfaction and patient safety without proactive initiatives led by their HR department. Health care HR professionals play a more significant role in developing and implementing initiatives that positively impact hospitals' most strategic objectives. ■

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1 The American Society for Healthcare Human Resources (ASHHRA). Summary of Findings The Role of Health Care Human Resources in Quality and Patient Safety. 3, July 24, 2008. Available at: www.ashhra.org/about/governance/files/TLF1Summary091608.pdf

2 HealthcareSource. 2011 HealthcareSource and ASHHRA Healthcare HR Initiatives Survey Results and Insight White Paper. July 2011. Available at: <http://solutions.healthcaresource.com/yourhrinitiatives.html>

3 Centers for Disease Control Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion, National Center for Infectious Diseases. Estimating Healthcare Associated Infections and Deaths in U.S. Hospitals, 2002. 2002.

Available at: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/pdf/hicpac/infections_deaths.pdf

4 The Health Research & Educational Trust (HRET), an affiliate of the American Hospital Association (AHA). Using Workforce Practices to Drive Quality Improvement: A Guide for Hospitals. June 2010. Available at: <http://www.hret.org/quality/projects/promotingsafetyandqualitythroughhuman-resourcepractices.shtml>

5 HealthcareSource. 2011 Healthcare HR Initiatives Survey.

Written comments submitted by participants in the online Survey. July 2011.

6 Ibid

7 The American Society for Healthcare Human Resources (ASHHRA). Summary of Findings The Role of Health Care Human Resources in Quality and Patient Safety. 5, July 24, 2008. Available at: www.ashhra.org/about/governance/files/TLF1Summary091608.pdf