Hospitals across the United States are feeling the pressure associated with Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey. The HCAHPS survey asks discharged patients 32 questions—21 focus on patient perspectives on care, four are screening questions, and seven relate to demographics. The 21 questions related to patient perspectives include patient rating items encompass nine key topics: communication with doctors and nurses, responsiveness of hospital staff, pain management, communication about medicines, discharge information, cleanliness of the hospital environment, quietness of the hospital environment, and transition of care.

Public reporting of survey results allows consumers to compare the performance of hospitals in their area, and HCAHPS is a major component in the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid’s Value-Based Purchasing Program (VBP). Since October 2012, this program has affected Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement rates.
About Value-Based Purchasing

VBP is an initiative that incents hospitals to provide high quality care and reduce healthcare costs. The cost-neutral VBP Program takes money from the worst performing hospitals and gives it to the best performers as a financial reward. For FY 2014 (October 1, 2013 through September 30, 2014), the CMS took back 1.25 percent of Medicare reimbursements at hospitals paid under Medicare’s inpatient prospective patient system. The resulting $1.1 billion will be distributed to hospitals based on how well they perform on various healthcare quality measures which include patient satisfaction. Reports from CMS indicate that 1,451 hospitals will be paid less in FY 2014 under VBP, while higher payments will be awarded to 1,231 hospitals.

Given this reality, hospitals need employees who understand the importance of patient-centered care. Therefore, Human Resources and Organizational Development teams should play a significant role in hiring, cultivating, and retaining a team that puts customer service first. In order to understand exactly how HR and OD can impact HCAHPS scores, we spoke with healthcare professionals from a range of organizations who shared their experiences and advice in this white paper. We also review 5 areas where HR and OD can develop initiatives to improve patient satisfaction and boost HCAHPS survey results, and we explore what these teams need to know about the survey.

Hospital Performance Drives Financial Outcomes

One reason HCAHPS data is so important is because the scores are closely linked with hospital financial performance. Hospital CFOs are acutely aware that a portion of CMS reimbursements is based on how well hospitals perform on process of care measures, HCAHPS scores, patient outcomes, and efficiency. The VBP formula is evolving over time.

Examples:

- **In FY 2013, Medicare payments to all hospitals were reduced by one percent to create a funding pool for incentive payments.** These were distributed based on performance on 20 measures in two domains: Clinical Process of Care and Patient Experience of Care. Twelve clinical processes of care measures were given a 70% weight and eight measures from the HCAHPS survey were given a 30% weight.

- **In FY 2014, Medicare payments to all hospitals were reduced by 1.25% to create the funding pool for incentive payments.** These funds will be distributed based on 24 measures in three domains: Clinical Process of Care, Patient Experience of Care, and Outcomes. Thirteen clinical processes of care measures are given a 45% weight, eight HCAHPS measures are given a 30% weight, and three outcome measures are given a 25% weight.

- **In FY 2015, Medicare payments to all hospitals will be reduced by 1.5% to create the funding pool for incentive payments.** These funds will be distributed based on 27 measures in four domains: Clinical Process of Care, Patient Experience of Care, Outcomes, and Efficiency. Thirteen clinical processes of care measures are given a 20% weight, eight HCAHPS measures are given a 30% weight, five outcome measures are given a 30% weight, and efficiency is given a 20% weight. Efficiency quantifies the Medicare spending per beneficiary.
Analysis by the Harvard School of Public Health has found that public and safety-net hospitals are losing the most under VBP. Hospitals treating the most low-income patients received an adjusted average total payment penalty in FY 2013 of 0.09% and public hospitals had an average penalty of 0.1%. Nonprofit hospitals saw an average penalty of 0.03% while for-profits on average received neither a bonus nor a penalty. One theory is that safety-net and public hospitals have lower financial margins and don’t have the resources to invest in patient satisfaction initiatives.

Although the Value-Based Purchasing formula is changing over time, the weight given to patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores remains constant. As a result, patient perception remains a critical component for HCAHPS results, as well as for CMS reimbursements. The interaction a patient has with every staff member or clinician during their hospital visit is an opportunity for a hospital’s brand to be positively reinforced or undermined. The tricky part is that patients perceive quality care differently than health professionals. Most healthcare providers equate quality care with positive treatment outcomes. Patients, however, often view quality healthcare as a satisfying in-hospital experience. To maximize HCAHPS scores, hospitals must educate every employee about how patients perceive quality and implement systems that help ensure patient expectations are exceeded. As Carol Statter, Workforce Development Coordinator at Infirmary Health noted, “Every HCAHPS score is the patient’s perception of what really happened.”

**Patient satisfaction** is also connected to better patient outcomes. Individuals who have a positive hospital experience are more likely to comply with treatment and discharge instructions. A study by Press Ganey Associates found that high HCAHPS performance (scores of 80 to 100) was associated with much lower than average readmission penalties. To enhance patient perceptions about quality, hospitals need to focus on consistency in every aspect of a patient’s stay, from interactions with staff members to care processes and handoffs across different disciplines within the hospital. Effective communication between healthcare providers and patients helps individuals become more engaged in their care and more likely to comply with discharge instructions after they leave the hospital.

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**Examples of HCAHPS Survey Questions**

The HCAHPS Survey asks a variety of questions related to the patient experience. Most questions are answered based on four possible responses: never, sometimes, usually, and always.

**Here are some examples of survey questions:**

- During this hospital stay, how often did nurses listen carefully to you?
- During this hospital stay, how often did doctors treat you with respect and courtesy?
- During this hospital stay, how often were your room and bathroom kept clean?
- During this hospital stay, how often was your pain well controlled?
- When I left the hospital, I clearly understood the purpose for taking each of my medications.

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**About Our Contributors**

**Infirmary Health**

- Health system made up of three acute care hospitals, three rehabilitation hospitals, three outpatient facilities and more than 30 medical clinics that serve Southwest Alabama
- Approximately 5,200 employees and more than 700 physicians

**University Health System**

- Health system made up of a 469-bed hospital with a Level I Trauma Center, 13 neighborhood clinics, five urgent-care clinics and four outpatient centers that serve South Texas
- Approximately 5,000 employees and nearly 700 resident physicians

**Holy Cross Hospital**

- 571-bed, general medical and surgical hospital in Fort Lauderdale, FL
- Approximately 2,300 employees

**Sonora Regional Medical Center**

- 152-bed acute care hospital in Sonora, CA
- Approximately 1,000 employees

**Southwestern Vermont Health Care**

- Health system made up of a 99-bed community hospital, a 150-bed nursing facility, visiting nurse and hospice, two primary care clinics, and a full-service cancer center
- Approximately 1,500 employees

**St. Tammany's Parish Hospital**

- 237-bed acute care facility in Covington, LA
- Approximately 1,700 employees

**Casa Colinas Centers for Rehabilitation**

- 68-bed rehabilitation hospital in Pomona, CA
- Approximately 700 employees

**UMC Health System**

- Health system serving 300,000 patients a year in West Texas and Eastern New Mexico
- Approximately 3,200 employees

**Trinity Health System**

- Health system made up of two 471-bed facilities, a full-service cancer center, an outpatient center, and family physicians clinics
- Approximately 1,800 employees
HR and OD’s Role in Improving HCAHPS Scores

HCAHPS responses are compiled into 10 measures that are publicly reported. Six summary measures relate to how well nurses and doctors communicate with patients, how responsive hospital staff are to patients’ needs, how well hospital staff help patients with pain management, how well the staff communicates with patients about medicines, and whether patients receive key information at time of discharge. Two individual measures focus on the cleanliness and quietness of the hospital room, and two global measures address the patients’ overall rating of the hospital and whether they would recommend the institution to family and friends. Publicly available HCAHPS scores are used to compare hospitals locally, regionally, and nationally. When it comes to HCAHPS scores, a patient-centered culture must come first. Published HCAHPS scores use the “top box” format, which means that the percentage of patients who respond in the most positive way to each question is reported. As a result, for a hospital to get credit for high quality patient experiences, its patients must reply “always” to HCAHPS survey questions. Therefore, top performing hospitals put the patient at the center of everything they do.

1. Hire the Right People

One of the best ways to get the right people into the right jobs is by hiring for fit. When employees reflect a hospital’s commitment to patient-centered excellence, they are more likely to provide patients with outstanding care and a positive experience.

Incorporating core values into pre-qualifying questions, as well as interview questions, can help identify candidates who will not fit the organization’s culture. Statter commented, “You can train people on your culture, but if it’s not in their heart, employees won’t be a good fit. We are trying to ask the right questions and try to find the right people on the frontend during recruiting.” Tyler Newton, Employment Supervisor at Sonora Regional Medical Center, agrees. “Most anyone can learn how to perform a clinical function. But you cannot teach attitude. You cannot teach commitment. And you can’t teach compassion.”

HCAHPS scores affect the financial solvency of hospitals across the country. However, high turnover has always negatively influenced the bottom line. To hire patient focused employees, an effective technique is to utilize behavioral-based interview questions that align with the organizational culture and to implement structured peer interviewing. Behavioral assessment software can help streamline this process.

With their commitment to patient satisfaction as a backdrop, University Health System has incorporated behavioral assessments into the hiring process. This tool supports the organization’s Triple Aim Plus initiative by aligning recruiting activities with University Health System’s desire to deliver high quality care and staff interactions to every patient. “We feel very strongly about customer service, so we want to probe on that during interviews,” said Andrea Casas, Executive Director, Human Resources. “Behavioral assessments give us an overview of a candidate’s potential for job success and identify areas related to patient centric care that we may want to explore further in the interview process.”
2. Empower Employees With Education and Tools That Support Positive Patient Experiences

Educating employees is critical during orientation and new hire mentorship programs can bolster employee engagement. At Sonora Regional Medical Center, HR has shifted focus from merely reviewing compliance during orientation to speaking about their organization’s mission and pairing new employees with a mentor. “At the end of a new employee’s first day of orientation, we pair them with a mentor; being located near Yosemite National Park, we decided to call our mentors Trail Guides,” said Newton. “It’s a program designed by employees. And the nice thing is that a Trail Guide is a new employee’s peer, not a supervisor. It’s really designed to ease the anxiety of our new hire and make them feel welcome.”

On-the-job support is a crucial factor linking employee satisfaction to patient satisfaction. A study by Towers Watson analyzed HCAHPS and other data at 21 acute care centers. It found that 95% of patients would recommend the facilities where employees had favorable views of the availability of tools and equipment to do their jobs, compared with 88% of patients at facilities where employee views about support were less favorable.12 It’s no surprise then that training and scripting on customer service principles have been adopted by leading hospitals. Infirmary Health, for example, developed principles of performance that are directly related to HCAHPS scores. Daily email reminders with different patient scenarios and recommended responses are sent to managers and directors. This information is shared at staff meetings and is posted in units. When employees have a script for situations, such as discussing the side effects of medications, they are better equipped to deal with patients. At Infirmary Health, HCAHPS scores are posted so employees can see that their efforts affected the results.

Southwestern Vermont Health Care knows what drives patient satisfaction and uses its learning management system to reinforce those factors. “Through analysis, we know that patient satisfaction results when doctors and nurses provide patients with consistent information, when patients feel a connection with their healthcare providers, and when patients perceive that our staff is working well together,” said Sheila Boni, Administrative Director of Nursing and Clinical Services. Southwestern Vermont Health Care’s learning management system (LMS) enables the organization to provide on-the-job support and resources to employees which reinforce the patient-centric culture. Employees take annual courses, which are required for regulatory compliance online, as well as tertiary education. The system also makes it easy for management to track how many employees have taken courses. “If we must communicate a policy change related to patient safety, for example, and we need 100% employee compliance in a short period of time, the LMS is a very efficient way to get that done,” said Alexandra Heintz, Administrative Director of Patient Safety and Quality.

With an LMS, information and knowledge is available anytime and anywhere. Employees can easily find resources on specific topics, and knowledge is available for top-down assignment from manager to employee, as well as bottom-up personal enrichment selected by the employee. Southwestern Vermont Health Care appreciates how their learning management system provides a unified repository for training and resources from diverse sources. “In addition to online courses, we use the LMS to archive town hall meetings, as well as information conveyed during staff meetings,” said Marlena Pellon, e-Learning Developer and Organizational Development Program Coordinator. Information delivered to staff is consistent across all departments, shifts, and sites.

Employee education is a proven way to keep patient satisfaction top of mind. Here are three tips for OD teams to make learning more effective for their employees:

1. Reinforce key concepts through online learning.
Assigning online learning modules to new employees during orientation and then as part of the annual mandatory education cycle can help implement new processes and change employee behavior. Examples of topics that support patient satisfaction include the Studer Group’s AIDET® (Acknowledge, Introduce, Duration, Explanation, Thank You), SHHH (Silent Hospitals Help Healing),13 and No Interruption Zones for medication administration. Southwestern Vermont Health Care, for instance, plans to hold monthly live AIDET presentations for the nursing staff and may deploy tertiary online education modules through their LMS to reinforce key points.
Employee Performance Formula

Hire for Fit—Job Performance is a Function of Three Basic Factors

Performance = Ability (can do) X Motivation (will do) X Experience (has done)

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| Basic nursing skills, accounting skills or pharmaceutical skills are all examples of the “can do” part of the equation. | Motivation is the “will do” side of the equation. For example, the candidate may have good technical skills but does he/she:  
• Come to work every day and on time?  
• Get along with co-workers?  
• Have innovative ideas for improving things?  
• Provide good customer service? | Experience is the “has done” part of the equation. This reflects what the candidate has done in the past that will influence their wisdom or judgment in a new position. |

Other ways eLearning can support patient satisfaction and influence HCAHPS scores include:

- Better patient education and discharge planning. Healthcare and healing continue after patients are discharged. As a result, it’s essential that patients understand what they need to do once they go home. Educating staff on how to provide more effective patient discharge instructions can reduce readmissions and improve patient safety.

- Creating environments that promote comfort and rest. Healthcare workers may not realize all the factors—even seemingly minor ones—that affect a patient’s ability to sleep and rest. The science around this topic is evolving, so educating busy healthcare workers can help them be mindful of how their actions affect patients.

- More effective pain management. When patients are uncomfortable, it’s natural that their satisfaction levels with their healthcare providers will be low. The tools and techniques available for pain management are continually changing, so frequent education ensures that clinicians are informed about the most current treatment methods and their appropriate use.

2. Include announcements related to patient experience on popular pages in the learning management system.
As with all software solutions, there are certain pages in a learning management system (LMS) that employees frequent more often than others. It can be helpful to include customized announcements with specific messages about patient satisfaction on those pages. This helps keep the patient experience top of mind for staff members.

3. Tailor education to unit or department specific needs.
Each team has its own unique challenges when it comes to the patient experience. As a result, creating a standard organization-wide education program focused on patient satisfaction isn’t the most efficient use of valuable training resources. An LMS can simplify the logistics of delivering tailored education. “We have employees in different parts of our organization—such as long-term care, visiting nurses, and the cancer center,” said Pellon. “As a result, we’ve customized training to address their unique needs. We have also tailored tracking reports for the lab which needs to send compliance reports to agencies on a quarterly basis.” As a hospital with ANCC Magnet Recognition®, Southwestern Vermont Health Care conducts an annual Learning Needs Assessment Survey. The survey is assigned to all staff through the LMS and the resulting data guides programs based on demand. The LMS also makes it easy to identify the percentage of staff survey completions and to provide information about survey participation to the American Nurse Credentialing Center (ANCC). Research conducted by Dr. Frederick P. Morgeson, Eli Broad Professor of Management at Michigan State University, found a clear connection between hospitals with ANCC Magnet Recognition and higher results on key HCAHPS measures related to discharge information, overall rating of the hospital, and likelihood to recommend the hospital. Targeted online education by unit enables employees to feel more involved in directing and improving their own development, leading to higher levels of patient satisfaction across the board.
3. Focus on Employee Satisfaction and Retention

One proven approach for improving employee satisfaction is to conduct regular employee surveys and then respond to the findings. Even if implementing a recommended change isn’t possible, employees appreciate knowing that their feedback has been considered and understanding why a change may not be feasible. Statter said, “At Infirmary Health, we found through our employee survey that employees were interested in tuition reimbursement, so we added forms to our Intranet and we will offer a higher reimbursement rate for allied health professionals.”

Some learning management systems include survey functionality which can be used to automate employee satisfaction surveys. These can be administered 30 days and 90 days post-hire to gauge new employee satisfaction, as well as annually for the entire employee population. By analyzing data based on department and job title, it’s easy to see where improvement opportunities exist. Creating special programs that target at-risk employee populations can improve employee satisfaction and retention. Holy Cross Hospital launched a successful new graduate program targeted at RNs. Patricia Ellison, Recruitment Coordinator at Holy Cross Hospital remarked, “Our new graduate program has had a high success rate. We have lower turnover and better quality candidates.”

Patient and Employee Satisfaction at Casa Colina Centers for Rehabilitation

Although Casa Colina Centers for Rehabilitation is not currently required to participate in the HCAHPS survey, the organization is strongly committed to patient care and customer satisfaction. The HR team has a lot of face-to-face interaction with its internal customers and provides service that enhances employee satisfaction.

The HR team visits the hospital floor often, interacting with employees and managers in order to hear firsthand what their needs are. “HR is a very customer service oriented department. We sit down with employees regularly and try to address any issues they may be having,” said Jessica Burchett, Human Resources Manager. “Even little things like making sure employees have current badges make a difference. If we are on the floor and see they need a new badge, we will go make them one and bring it back to them, instead of making employees take time off the floor to come to us. Little things like this show employees we care and really help to improve the employee experience and morale.”

All of the clinical managers at Casa Colina are also “treaters” who interact directly with patients and their families and provide therapy or nursing or other types of patient care. As a result, they are extremely busy. By getting out on the floor and resolving problems on the spot, HR enables both managers and frontline employees to spend more time with patients. “Employee satisfaction and patient satisfaction are very connected,” said Burchett. “When employees aren’t stressed about things like their paycheck or benefits, they can focus exclusively on patient needs and providing an outstanding experience.”

The Who and How of HCAHPS

Since July 2007, hospitals that are subject to IPPS (Inpatient Prospective Payment System) payment provisions must collect, submit, and publicly report HCAHPS data in order to receive their full IPPS annual payment update. Non-IPPS hospitals, such as Critical Access Hospitals, can voluntarily participate in HCAHPS. To participate in HCAHPS Data Collection and Public Reporting, all hospitals self-administering the survey, hospitals administering the survey for multiple sites, and survey vendors must be in compliance with the requirements in the HCAHPS Quality Assurance Guidelines, V8.0. In addition, hospitals and survey vendors must submit a Participation Form to the HCAHPS Project Team for approval prior to the administration of the HCAHPS survey.
4. Encourage Employee Accountability

Employee accountability is about creating a culture in which employees feel responsible for organizational goals, such as improving HCAHPS scores. Dr. Morgeson has the following advice for healthcare organizations, "Instead of simply exhorting employees to take responsibility, organizations should put structures in place that encourage, enhance and enable their employees to be accountable."

Holy Cross Hospital has done just that to reinforce the importance of the HCAHPS survey. Employees participate in a gain sharing program that focuses on the organization’s goals inclusive of HCAHPS scores. Ellison said, “Employees are rewarded financially if we meet our goals and that helps bring the importance of the survey home to everybody.”

Establishing a culture of employee accountability also means ensuring that employees and managers communicate clearly with one another and are fully aware of their responsibilities. Research done by Northwestern University’s Forum for People Performance Management and Measurement found that communication is a key factor in employee engagement.16 Performance management software facilitates that communication by giving employees a platform to acknowledge and access their job description and providing managers with reminders on the tasks they need to complete with respect to performance appraisals—a critical component of employee accountability. Adrienne Cozart, Vice President of Human Resources at UMC Health System notes, “The performance management process is a way we effectively communicate with our employees. Make sure performance appraisals are done on time by holding your managers accountable. These things make a big difference to your employees.”

By establishing goals for employees, performance management plays another central role in employee engagement and better patient experiences. According to a global workforce study conducted by Towers Watson, clear measurable goals are an indicator of high employee engagement.17 Goals help teams understand how their work drives broader organizational success. However, clear feedback and guidance are essential for employees to successfully reach their objectives. Performance management software provides managers with a place to capture coaching notes for each employee. This input can be easily accessed online by employees. Engaged employees feel valued and this translates into higher quality patient care and patient experiences.

When it comes to HCAHPS, HR must also hold itself accountable for making an impact. “HR has to be a bit more proactive because we’re not a revenue generating department,” noted Newton. “We’re a saving department, so if we can find ways to save the organization money through reduced turnover, that’s where we can really become a partner with the rest of the hospital.”

5. Measure and Reward High Performers

Regular performance evaluations can be used to reinforce the importance of customer service. Infirmary Health requires nurse managers to complete a performance evaluation four times a year to enhance communication with employees. These evaluations give managers the opportunity to recognize nurses who provide excellent service, rather than waiting for an annual review meeting.

University Health System has augmented its performance management system with a robust employee recognition program that provides staff with positive feedback throughout the year. “We aligned the employee recognition program with the values embodied in our Triple Aim Plus initiative. Our goal is to recognize employees for what matters most to the organization,” said Casas. “Recognition drives performance and employee engagement. When employees perform better, our patients are the benefactors.”

Automating the performance management process can also help organizations hold both employees and managers accountable for following the right processes. As quality expert W. Edwards Deming said, “94 percent of problems can be traced to the process, but only 6 percent to the person. But often the person is measured, not the process. Start with the assumption that it is the process that is broken and most times you will be right.” Performance management tools are used to automate feedback and to enable data transparency. They stimulate dialogue between employees and managers about process and support positive discipline programs. Kathie Pasquarella, Director of Training and Education at Trinity Health acknowledged, “Organizations who standardize processes improve worker efficiency and productivity. By automating performance management, we have really looked at how our processes are organized and improved it.”
Conclusion:
Healthcare HR and OD Play an Important Role in HCAHPS Scores

HCAHPS serves as an important proxy of measuring your hospital’s brand equity. By having an organization-wide resolute focus on improving patient experiences, you can boost HCAHPS scores—HR and OD teams play a critical and important role in making this happen.

Let’s review the 5 HR and OD focused initiatives for enhancing HCAHPS scores:

1. Hire with a focus on the right cultural fit for your healthcare organization
2. Educate employees about patient satisfaction and provide them with ongoing learning opportunities
3. Launch initiatives to increase employee satisfaction
4. Improve employee accountability and link this to HCAHPS
5. Promote consistent performance management practices across all departments

The key to promoting patient centric behaviors is to educate employees, give them the tools they need to do their jobs, and then hold them accountable for outstanding service. Most importantly, by hiring for fit and retaining top performers, HR and OD can have a significant impact on patient satisfaction, HCAHPS performance, and ultimately the hospital’s bottom line.

“Through analysis, we know that patient satisfaction results when doctors and nurses provide patients with consistent information, when patients feel a connection with their healthcare providers, and when patients perceive that our staff is working well together.”

Sheila Boni
Administrative Director of Nursing and Clinical Services
Southwestern Vermont Health Care

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