

Reducing healthcare support worker vacancies – case studies

Developing and supporting resilience in the new workforce

West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

What was the problem?

As a small trust based in a market town in a rural area, West Suffolk competed for healthcare support workers with larger, better-known hospitals nearby. In addition, a significant number left before completing their initial 12-week training. Reasons for this varied, but often they felt overwhelmed in a busy environment.

What was the solution?

Identifying the kind of support that would help develop more confident and resilient healthcare support workers. Recognising that induction is a crucial time to support new staff, the trust reformed its care certificate policy. It made a commitment to new staff in the form of a timeline with milestones.

In their first four weeks, staff receive:

- four clinical induction days
- five development days
- shadowing and supernumerary shifts.

In their first 12 weeks, staff:

- receive assessment in practice
- complete a competency pack
- complete a workbook.

In addition, they are offered:

- a follow-up study day at six months
- an acute illness management (AIMS) course at nine months.

New starters are automatically enrolled onto the programme, so they can all achieve their certificate. Even staff who already held their certificate were enrolled, so they did not miss the associated development and support.

Those on the programme are given a 'blue flash' to wear in their top pocket to signal their status as a new staff member, encouraging more experienced staff to support and guide them. They are also allocated a 'buddy' in their practice area to mentor them during their first months in post.



In response to feedback, the trust identified three themes to further enhance, support and develop staff resilience:

Programme content – further developing clinical skills and coping strategies required in practice.

Making staff feel valued through:

- all staff receiving a focused, quality and documented visit from the trust's care certificate co-ordinator

- increasing one-to-one support when required
- improving communication systems between staff member, education team and clinical manager
- providing an interprofessional learning environment
- a bespoke, printed workbook
- marking the workbook, with all staff receiving verbal and written feedback
- adapting assessment methods to suit individual needs.

Developing working relationships through:

- structured processes developed with HR
- support plans developed with the new starter, their manager and the education team
- in-house specialists teaching on the programme.

What were the challenges?

Engaging some temporary staff was a challenge. The trust wanted them to feel valued as part of the organisation but found it difficult to communicate with them reliably and consistently. Temporary staff had difficulty getting their competencies signed off as they often changed area (and therefore manager). As a result, most staff who had not completed their care certificate were temporary staff.

Maintaining engagement with managers during periods of staff vacancy and sickness was also a challenge.

What were the results?

After the care certificate policy was overhauled, more recruits enrolled for it and more completed it. The percentage of staff leaving employment within 12 months of starting reduced from 27% to 10%.

The trust has received much positive feedback:

“I have learnt new skills and it has made me more confident in my practice.”

“It is delivered in a manner that you are able to understand.”

“I enjoyed the practical elements of the programme.”

“It made me feel valued as part of the hospital team.”

“The care certificate co-ordinator is kind and engaging and displays passion and care towards new nursing assistants.”

What were the learning points?

It is important to engage temporary staff frequently and consistently to avoid drop-off. Ensuring sustained staff engagement with the programme is imperative to its success.

Making small changes to help staff feel valued can have a big impact.

Having a clear, equitable care certificate policy ensures all staff are supported and helps address issues of non-compliance when providing patient care.

Next steps and sustainability

Currently the role that facilitates the programme is occupied by one person; having another staff member would ensure sustainability and encourage innovation. Feedback about the programme is reviewed regularly to ensure individual needs are met. The trust is using elements of the programme to support and upskill other teams, such as housekeeping and portering staff.

Want to know more?

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To see the other case studies in this series: visit the NHS Improvement website at: <https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/improving-staff-retention/>

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