

**IMPROVING STAFF
RETENTION:
KEY CONVERSATIONS TO HAVE
WITH YOUR STAFF**

INTRODUCTION

Retention of the workforce is a key priority for the NHS. In the face of supply shortages across a number of staff groups, it is more important than ever that the service retains its skilled and experienced workers. This short guide has been developed to support you to better retain your staff.

Understanding what matters to your staff can help you overcome the challenges you face to retain them. Conversations with employees are an important part of the employment relationship and can help build trust, loyalty and performance. They also help you to understand your employees' day-to-day challenges, career aspirations and help identify areas for improvement.

This guide provides practical examples and suggestions for key conversations to have with your staff, which can help you build your overall retention strategy.





Recruitment

A good recruitment process helps to ensure that staff have the right knowledge, skills and values, and are a good fit for your organisation. Discussions with potential applicants should focus on giving them a realistic insight into the role they're applying for and the organisation as a whole. Ensuring that candidates have realistic expectations of the role will reduce the likelihood of them leaving the organisation in the first six months.

One trust developed career stories to help applicants to understand what it is like to work for the trust and what a day in the life of an employee looks like.

Values-based recruitment (VBR) is an approach to help attract employees whose personal values and behaviours align with the values of your organisation. VBR can help contribute to a reduction in staff turnover by ensuring from the outset that the staff recruited fit within your organisation's values.

Find out more about how to implement values-based recruitment on **our dedicated webpages**.

Post-offer

Keeping in touch with staff between offer and start date can help to reduce post-offer drop outs. Regularly contacting candidates post-offer is a great way of keeping them engaged in your organisation.

These approaches are particularly effective at engaging with candidates who have a long time between offer and their start date, for example offers given to student nurses. Many trusts already keep in touch with candidates waiting to start a new role, examples include:

- Sending a series of three handwritten postcards in the lead up to their start date, from the chief nurse, their ward leader and a colleague that they'll be working with.
- Developing a new starter area on the intranet which helps to instill a sense of community prior to their start date.
- Introducing an online onboarding system where successful candidates can access new starter forms and book their pre-employment check meeting.
- Creating a closed Facebook group for new starters to engage with HR colleagues. This has reduced post offer drop out from 20 per cent to 5 per cent.

Induction

Staff should instantly be made to feel valued when they join an organisation. A robust induction provides new employees with the support and information they need to fit in, feel part of the team and work effectively from the start.

Regular catch ups or one-to-one meetings will help to assess progress and offer support. In between these catch ups you can offer new employees additional support through a buddy or enable them to build a network with other new starters. Several trusts have implemented innovative approaches to inductions including:

- Inviting newly qualified nurses to tea with the chief nurse to promote a culture where nurses feel confident and highly supported in their new roles.
- Developing a preceptorship programme which starts with a two-week programme full of clinical skills, providing information to empower nurses at the start of their career journey.
- Providing pin badges for preceptees to wear, which highlights to others that the practitioner is in their transitional phase from a student to a qualified member of staff.

KEY CONVERSATION TOUCH POINTS

Stay discussions

Stay discussions, or conversations scheduled at regular points throughout the employment journey, can help you gather feedback about what is working well and any areas that could be improved. The aim of these conversations is to better understand why employees stay and what might cause them to leave, giving you the information you need to retain your staff.

They can be one-to-one conversations between an employee and their line manager, a manager from another directorate/department, or by a member of the HR team. They could also be delivered in a focus group format for specific teams such as community nurses.

These discussions should remain confidential and be conducted periodically, for example each quarter for new starters or annually for existing staff. By regularly having these conversations, you can find out important information about their aspirations, frustrations and their plans to stay or leave the organisation. It also demonstrates to your staff that you care about their experience.

Discussions should be informal and focused around two or three key questions and could take place as part of a regular one-to-one or appraisal. Stay questions are not prescriptive and questions should be posed flexibly and be adapted to the circumstances of the individual.

Case studies

Using the bus model at Medway Community Hospital

Towards the end of 2015, the HR and OD team at Medway Community Healthcare (MCH) worked with community nursing teams to understand why staff were leaving and to see what could be done to improve retention. The service held a series of workshops and captured staff feedback using the MCH bus model as a metaphor for working at the trust:

- What would make you climb on board the bus?
- What would make you stay for the journey?
- What would make you jump off the bus?

This helped the service to understand staff needs and frustrations, and how these were impacting staff retention.

Nursing focus groups at Buckinghamshire NHS Trust

Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust **set up focus groups** for existing nurses to identify:

- their reasons for joining the trust
- their expectations and whether these were met
- what factors would make them leave the organisation
- what factors might influence their decisions to stay.

This informed the trust's action plan with key priorities to make improvements and led to a reduction in nursing turnover by two per cent in 12 months.



CASE STUDY

STAY CONVERSATIONS AT WESTERN SUSSEX HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

Background

To retain a skilled and motivated workforce, Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust wanted to learn more about what employees specifically liked and disliked about their jobs. This information was used to highlight the triggers that could cause an individual to consider leaving and helped the trust to make improvements in their area of work.

The challenge

A review of staff turnover data revealed that a high proportion of staff left the organisation during the first two years of their employment.

The trust was keen to encourage staff to share their views and wanted to use this detail in addition to the findings from the NHS Staff Survey. Exit discussions provided a valuable data source, but unfortunately only 35 per cent of leavers returned these, as they took place immediately before an individual left the organisation.

The solution

The trust introduced stay conversations, which were conducted as periodic one-to-one informal meetings between a manager and an employee. The meetings identified and reinforced the factors that drive an employee to stay. This provided a snapshot of employee satisfaction and enabled the trust to resolve potential issues before they occurred, and mitigated the risk of employees resigning.

For staff with under 24 months service, stay discussions are now conducted every three months. Staff with three to five years' service have these check-ins every six months, and for those with over five years' service every 12 months. They can be included as part of the regular appraisal and review cycle, so as not to add an additional burden to managers.

Board approval was sought at the outset and was then presented to divisional leads, with training rolled out to area managers in certain departments with a particularly high turnover.

Resources, including guidance notes for managers, suggested questions for use in interviews and template forms for recording feedback, were designed by the HR team and promoted to all staff with line management responsibilities.

The results

These regular conversations with staff have provided the trust with an additional information about what is important to staff and why they choose to stay with the organisation. The very act of engaging with staff and giving them the opportunity to communicate what is important to them has let staff know they are appreciated and valued. It is too early to properly evaluate the impact and more work needs to be done to increase uptake across the trust. However, anecdotal evidence shows that the approach has been well received and has contributed to improvements in overall staff engagement and the ability to retain staff.

Please contact WorkforceSupply@nhsemployers.org for further information.

KEY CONVERSATION TOUCH POINTS

Having ‘itchy feet’ discussions

Many organisations have identified an ‘itchy feet’ period, where an employee is considering leaving but hasn’t yet made up their mind. Actively engaging with employees at this stage can help you to identify and address any issues. It could lead to that member of staff staying in their current role or moving to a role elsewhere in the organisation. Several trusts have implemented measures to enable staff to talk through their options, for example:

- Developing a helpline for staff who are considering leaving so they can talk to HR staff (or other staff) who may be able to advise and address any issues.
- Nominating a career development lead for each staff group that staff can contact to discuss professional and personal career development.
- Introducing ‘itchy feet’ conversations or events as part of career clinics.
- Implementing an internal transfer scheme, to allow staff to move wards or departments rather than leave the organisation.

Exit discussions

When all options have been explored and an employee signals their intention to leave it is also important to have a conversation which allows them to discuss their reasons and experiences of the organisation. They have knowledge, insight and most likely a different perspective and it’s key to harness this before they leave.

While gathering this information may not prevent a particular staff member from leaving, the collective feedback from these discussions can help to inform future changes to help better retain other staff members. It also demonstrates to your workforce that you care about them and the reasons why they choose to leave. Best practice dictates that these conversations should be scheduled as soon as possible after an employee hands in their notice.

As with stay discussions, these can be conducted by the employee’s line manager, a manager from another department/directorate, a member of the HR team, or by an external source. Alternative approaches to collecting exit data can involve the use of exit questionnaires or surveys, which can be completed online or manually.

An exit questionnaire or survey should include a set of rateable questions, which will provide you with quantitative data which will help identify any trends. You may also wish to consider including free text boxes where individuals can provide additional feedback. Data generated from exit questionnaires can be shared with workforce leads and provides useful information for workforce tracking and planning.

Suggested questions to include

It’s worth asking some general questions about how the individual has felt about working at the organisation, what they’ve enjoyed, any improvements they think could be made and whether they would recommend the organisation as a place to work.

It’s also crucial to ask why they are leaving and what prompted them to seek alternative employment. As before, it’s also good to explore whether they felt supported in role, had clear objectives and received adequate training.



CASE STUDY

EXIT DISCUSSIONS AT ROYAL SURREY COUNTY HOSPITAL NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

Background

Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (RSCH) had an average of 68 leavers per month. With lots of anecdotal evidence around the reasons for this high turnover, the trust sought to gain a better understanding as to why staff were choosing to leave.

The challenge

Although RSCH used exit questionnaires, the trust identified that only approximately four per cent were completed, the data collated was not centrally recorded, and there was no formal method for following up on any of the issues raised. 25 per cent of reasons for leaving were also recorded on the NHS Electronic Staff Record (ESR) as other/not known. As a result, there was limited data available for an analysis of why staff were leaving the organisation.

The solution

The trust's workforce information team set about reviewing the leavers process. Working with key stakeholders from across the trust, the team revised the guidance documents and forms to simplify the process for managers and employees, this included a revised exit questionnaire that is now hosted online. For ease of accessibility, a paper copy of the questionnaire was also made available to ensure that all responses were held centrally. The questionnaire was also shared with staff moving internally to ensure all feedback was captured.

All leavers documentation is available on the trust's intranet within a dedicated section. The exit questionnaire is promoted at each stage of the leaving cycle and employees are actively encouraged to complete it prior to leaving the trust. An online link to the questionnaire is also included in the letter sent from payroll confirming the leaver's details.

The questionnaire includes both rate response questions and free text questions. The responses are reviewed on a weekly basis by the workforce team and they then undertake follow up activities. Follow up letters are sent periodically to staff that have left and have not completed a questionnaire.

The results

The new process went live in January 2016 and has resulted in the completion of exit questionnaires increasing from 4 to 56 per cent. The proportion of reasons for leaving recorded on ESR as other/not known has also reduced to 4.8 per cent.

Top tips

- Communicate with key stakeholders to get necessary buy-in.
- Do not include an 'other/not known' option on exit questionnaires as they limit you from gaining more in-depth insights.
- Providing the option of online/paper questionnaires allows employees to provide feedback at any time and encourages more free and open disclosure.
- Keep reviewing and revising your processes.

Please contact WorkforceSupply@nhsemployers.org for further information.

TOP TIPS FOR STAY AND EXIT DISCUSSIONS

There are lots of ways your organisation can implement stay and exit discussions. We have compiled a list of our top tips developed with NHS organisations.

- ① Develop brief guidance to explain the process to employees and line managers.
- ② Empower line managers to have these discussions with staff.
- ③ Training can be provided to those conducting stay or exit discussions, this may form part of existing training offers.
- ④ Line managers should provide the employee with a clear explanation of the process, the value and the types of information that will be sought. Explain how action points will be followed up and progress fed back.
- ⑤ Aim to keep discussions short, to enable busy staff and managers to take part.
- ⑥ Consider how the data gathered will be collated and utilised to improve staff experience at team or department level and organisationally.
- ⑦ If possible, build these processes in to what already exists such as appraisals or existing leaver processes. Ensure it fits with the context of the organisation.
- ⑧ Whoever is posing the questions should encourage employees to identify strengths as well as areas for improvement, listening carefully to employee responses, remaining objective and impartial throughout the discussion.
- ⑨ It is important to be honest that it may not be possible to act on every item raised during a conversation, this may be for several reasons including financial and operational constraints.
- ⑩ Notes from the meeting should be kept centrally but confidentially, and used as a reference at future discussions. Managers should feedback key themes and identifiable trends centrally so that this data can be used to inform initiatives to aid retention.
- ⑪ Exit discussions should end on a positive note, thanking the employee for their time, co-operation and input. Wish them every success in their new role.
- ⑫ Employees should not be required to participate against their will as without active co-operation the information gained is not meaningful. However, employees should be encouraged to participate by emphasising how the information provided could help to improve the workplace in the future.
- ⑬ If a leaver raises a complaint he or she should be asked how they wish to resolve the matter.

NHS Employers is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first.

We actively seek the views of employers on key workforce issues and use our expertise to support them to develop a sustainable workforce, improve staff experience and provide high quality care to patients. We influence workforce policy at regional, national and European levels and turn policies into practical workable solutions.

NHS Employers is part of the NHS Confederation.

Contact us

 @nhsemployers

 @nhse_wfs

 NHS Employers

Floor 15
Portland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5BH

2 Brewery Wharf
Kendell Street
Leeds LS10 1JR

