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Internal transfer scheme to improve nurse retention

University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Organisation

University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH) is a major London trust serving a population of 1.6 million people. UCLH was one of the first trusts to gain foundation status and is comprised of five specialist hospitals, providing acute and specialist care to the local population and across the UK. The trust employs more than 8,000 staff, 3,000 of whom are nursing staff.

What was the aim/problem?

Generally, the trust does not struggle to attract nurses. However, in 2014 analysis revealed a nursing vacancy rate of 16 per cent; and 648 registered nurses were recruited with 443 nurses leaving. To understand the reasons why nurses were leaving, the trust commissioned independent market research, established focus groups with existing staff, and exit interviews with nurse leavers.

Discussions revealed a key reason for nurses leaving was a lack of awareness of opportunities for career development in the wider organisation. Nurses were put off by the formal recruitment and selection process and frustrated with having to be put through assessment centres and repeat pre-employment checks when applying for a sideways move.

Staff were also keen to gain experience working at a central London trust and then move outside of London within one to two years of promotion. Costs of filling the gaps with bank and agency workers were rapidly becoming unsustainable, putting additional pressure on permanent staff to provide cover and ensure the highest quality of care for patients.

What was the solution?

In 2015, UCLH's board agreed a strategy for nurse recruitment and retention which aimed to maintain and regulate the trust's nursing workforce. The trust established a recruitment and retention steering group, comprised of nursing and workforce leads, to design and implement improvements.

A nurse retention strategy was developed to improve job satisfaction, morale and career development opportunities. Two unique nurse-led initiatives to support opportunities and prospects available at UCLH were piloted and introduced.

The first initiative was an internal transfer process: a fast-track for nurses interested in a sideways move, reducing the complexity and time taken to fill vacancies. The process was piloted for band 5 nurses in one department, and basic principles were agreed for eligibility based on length of service, performance, and having passed probationary periods.

The second initiative was a careers clinic offering professional career advice to nurses considering an internal transfer. The clinic allowed eligible candidates to undertake shadowing or bank shifts in the area they were interested in moving to.

Owing to initial success in the pilots and significant interest from nurses, the initiatives were quickly rolled out to all parts of the nursing workforce - from healthcare assistants through to ward sisters and matrons.

What were the challenges?

A range of measures were implemented to assess the impact of the initiatives. Live staff vacancy data was used to drive improvement, compare and monitor progress, and keep staff informed. For example, to prevent wards from destabilising due to a rise in vacancies, a vacancy rate of 40 per cent resulted in a transfer being delayed until the ward was safely staffed; a transfer date would then be mutually agreed. This measure was applied to all transfer requests.

An unintended consequence of the initiative was that during the first two months of implementation it became apparent that two wards had a higher than average number of nurses wishing to transfer. However, this allowed for a further deep dive by the leaders in those areas to identify management and leadership challenges affecting retention and staff morale. This has allowed for early intervention, and for HR to offer additional support to prevent issues from escalating.

What were the results?

To date, 225 internal transfers have taken place, many of these have involved nurses who would have otherwise considered leaving the trust to develop the scope of their practice. The process has also helped the trust to fill vacancies that are typically harder to recruit to.

The nursing vacancy rate has halved and now stands at 8 per cent. This has delivered financial savings by reducing recruitment costs and reliance on agency nurses. The time to hire staff through the transfer process is significantly reduced with no pre-employment checks required - the only delay for the transferee is their notice period. It has also provided more control over leavers, as transfer dates can be negotiated (between two to 12 weeks), which helps departments experiencing higher vacancy rates.

During the three-month pilot in 2015, UCLH retained 43 band 5 and 6 nurses. Overall, 296 band 5 and 6 nurses left in 2015, compared to 443 in 2014.

UCLH has trialled these initiatives with its nursing assistant workforce – another staff group with high turnover. So far, seven nursing assistants have transferred to other specialties within the trust and 19 attended the careers clinic to explore available opportunities. The initiatives have proved popular among the workforce, with nurses feeling enabled to map their own career pathways and benefit from the wide range of opportunities in-house. Staff are less anxious about needing to apply for a promotion, when their preference is to gain experience at their current band. On top of this, some band 6 nurses have opted to transfer to band 5 posts to upskill in certain specialties.

Another positive from the transfer scheme has been that the trust has invested in and improved leadership training for managers to manage their vacancies, coaching, difficult conversations and so on.

The initiative has helped to create a transparent culture where charge nurses work in partnership with their peers to support the needs of the future workforce. The process works in practice and is flexible enough to allow for local variations.

Below are two quotes that illustrate how the initiatives have been received by the nursing workforce.

- “The process was straightforward, smooth and stress free. I feel lucky to have a careers clinic available to help nurses like me empower change in our own careers.”
- “Transferring to another speciality via the transfer scheme is quicker and smoother and meant I could still work with familiar faces and for a great organisation.”

What were the learning points?

UCLH has identified learning points that it has attributed to the success of the programme.

- Engage with staff at all levels from the outset. Talking to senior leadership helped to secure necessary buy in, while discussions with existing staff and leavers helped the organisation to fully understand why nurses were leaving.
- Initially piloting in one department allowed for testing and refinement of the concept. By ironing out any issues, other departments were more willing to take part.
- Educating senior nurses about the benefits and impact on improving retention and lessening the need for continual recruitment, was necessary to allay fears that the process would result in large volumes of movement.
- Allowing for more honest conversations across the workforce about nurses’ career aspirations and desire for development opportunities helped to get the initiative off the ground.

Next steps and sustainability

UCLH is now considering whether the internal transfer process could be delivered in partnership with other NHS organisations across the region. The potential to roll out the initiative across the sustainability and transformation partnership (STP) is considered an important step in tackling issues of retention across the NHS and could foster a collaborative approach to working across a region. Since UCLH is already part of the [Capital Nurse Programme](#), which aims to secure a sustainable nursing workforce across London, the trust can share learning and work collaboratively with other provider organisations.

UCLH is also looking at how the model established for nurses could be applied to allied health professionals and administrative roles. Furthermore, discussions are now underway to incorporate formal career discussions into preceptorship programmes, so nurses are familiar with what UCLH can offer as an employer.

Want to know more?

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Trust resources

[Transfer process guidance](#)