
Creative Solutions for Staff Retention



Long work hours, changing shifts, lack of sleep, fatigue, job-related stress...these are only some of the challenges NHS staff have to endure in trying to provide the best care for their patients. The results of the latest NHS staff survey of the views of personnel in England, therefore, came as no surprise. Of the 497,000 employees polled, more than half had thought about leaving their existing job, and 21% about quitting the NHS altogether.

With nearly 100,000 vacancies across trusts in England currently, trusts have started to give more attention to their staff's wellbeing. A number of initiatives aimed at retaining employees – which may help mitigate the escalating staffing crisis – have been launched. These include programmes to help workers combat anxiety and depression, resiliency training, and flexible working hours.

At Calderdale and Huddersfield trust, for instance, Zumba classes are available and a staff choir has been formed to give workers options for relaxation. In addition, the trust offers free physiotherapy, as well as financial advice and management, through a tie-up with a financial wellbeing firm. The latter also includes low-cost loans so that staff can consolidate debts. Providing assistance with money matters is a growing trend, owing to the fact that NHS staff have had difficulty making ends meet during the last eight years of zero or 1% pay rises.

Health- and wellbeing-boosting activities for employees at the Walton Centre, a specialist trust in Liverpool that provides neurological care, include weekly yoga, pilates and circuit-training classes. The trust also offers free massage and mindfulness sessions and has promoted the use of an app called Shiny Mind, which offers inspirational messages, and access to "resilience training".

Notably, such initiatives are driven by necessity, not benevolence. As Suzie Bailey, director of leadership and organisational development at the health think-tank, the King's Fund, has pointed out, "health service leaders know they need to do everything possible to keep hold of the staff they have."

The current workforce shortage, Bailey adds, has prompted organisations to devise "creative" solutions in order to keep staff happy and motivated. Leeds community healthcare trust (LCHT), for example, shares how its new job-sharing arrangement has been successful in retaining two senior staff members – both are mothers and neither wanted to work full-time. For the last 18 months, Jenny Allen and Laura Smith have been job-sharing LCHT's director of workforce role, the first time the trust has opened such a senior post to two candidates.

Under this job-sharing scheme, Smith works Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, with Allen on duty the last three days of the week. If there's overlapping, this is intentional so that they can update each other on a Wednesday. Sharing the work means the two directors also use a single diary and email address. The arrangement is working well, according to Thea Stein, LCHT's chief executive. "Jenny and Laura provide a great pair of role models in an organisation that knows it is creating healthcare for the future and has an increasingly millennial workforce looking to work in different ways," Stein says.

Other trusts are also promoting flexible working, such as compressed hours and term-time-only working. This is part of their effort to reduce the high attrition caused by trainee doctors and nurses giving up worryingly early in their careers and staff of all ages quitting because they find the job too strenuous and demanding.

While many trusts are trying to do their best to make the NHS a better employer, Bailey of King's Fund says "there is a long way to go." Likewise, Danny Mortimer, chief executive of NHS Employers, is of the opinion that the various initiatives, while laudable, may not be enough to resolve the staffing crisis.

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"Government policy can help with some of this: migration policy, greater flexibility in apprenticeships and reform of our pensions scheme sit alongside a desperate need to invest in social care," according to Mortimer.

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