



## SENIOR LIVING

# Using Big Data to Address the Growing Health Care Worker Shortage

One of the significant problems looming over long-term care (LTC) facilities is the growing issue of worker shortage. Turnover rates range from 55% to 75% for nurses and aides and sometimes even over 100% for aides.<sup>1</sup> Addressing the issue with implementable solutions is vital, as staff ratios and retention are one of the critical benchmarks measured in the mandated Five-Star Quality Rating.

This article will examine the ways some LTC facilities are successfully addressing this problem through staff retention. They recognize that this is essentially a retention problem and not a hiring problem. An estimate of the per-worker cost of turnover in the general U.S. economy is about 20% of the worker's annual compensation amount.<sup>2</sup> Costs aside, employee retention is a strong indicator of a facility's quality of care. Satisfied employees are less likely to leave their jobs, and this satisfaction carries over to the quality of work they do, and ultimately, the care they extend to the residents.

### Insight Inspires Motivation

Motivating employees to stay has less to do with pay and more to do with triggering an intrinsic quality within each worker. This is that golden, yet elusive, elixir identified in psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work, "Flow," which naturally leads individuals to push themselves to higher performance levels. While intrinsic motivation is internally generated within each employee, there is still quite a bit that managers can do to encourage this transformation within their employees.

A study by the Harvard Business Review (HBR) found that when people feel that they have clear and meaningful goals, and sufficient resources, they get an instant boost to their emotions, their motivation to do a great job, and their perceptions of the work and the organization.<sup>3</sup>

The key element in this scenario is "clear and meaningful goals," because it ties directly into the data that LTC facilities are generating each day. Big data analytics empowers health care providers and organizations to see how their actions

1. Barbera, Ph.D., E. (2014, February 6). "The Keys to Reducing Turn-Over in Long-Term Care." McKnights Long-Term Care, <http://www.mcknights.com/the-world-according-to-dr-el/the-keys-to-reducing-turn-over-in-long-term-care/article/333071/>

2. Ibid.

3. Kramer, S., & Amabile, T. (2011, May 5). "The Power of Small Wins." The Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2011/05/the-power-of-small-wins>.

are improving outcomes and making a difference. Managers can use these data to set goals for employees and to provide encouragement

Data are a by-product of working in a highly-regulated industry, combined with requirements to capture key information. While many LTC staff feel as if they're drowning in data, proactive LTC facilities are using the data to empower their staff and improve their ratings.

### Data Reveal What Employees are Doing Right

Perhaps the most obvious way for LTC facilities to use their data is to show proof to hospitals regarding their success at improving patient outcomes. "Data shines a light on areas of progress, and areas of weakness that need improvement, which provides insight on adjustments we can make that can make a big impact," said Erik Hatten, chief operating officer, American Health Companies.

But for many LTC facilities, sharing this data with employees is a strategic choice that encourages them to take ownership of their performance and find ways to improve the ratings of the entire facility. "Collecting and utilizing data has become part of our culture, and we use it daily to enhance our performance," added Hatten. These quality metrics can instill a sense of pride within employees. "Employee retention is not about pay; it's about feeling valued."

### What You Tell Me Matters

Of all the things that can boost inner work life, the most important is showing employees how they're making progress in meaningful work. As reported in HBR, "Whether the goals are lofty or modest, if they are meaningful to the worker and it is clear how his or her efforts contribute to them, progress toward them can galvanize inner work life."

When Georgia-based Health Management started its initiative to reduce the number of injuries resulting from falls, they knew that communication was essential. Once a set of best practices was established and documented, these were explained to every member of the staff, even the janitors, to encourage a team-based approach. Now that the initiative is rolled out, managers meet directly with the employees involved in each incident within 24 hours "to communicate clearly to them that what you're doing

is making a difference,” explained Deborah Meade, CEO of Health Management. These one-to-one meetings also provide insight that is used for continuous improvement, is added to the patient’s care plan and becomes part of the best practices protocol. “We want to learn what worked and what didn’t,” she added.

### **Steady, Consistent Progress Updates**

More importantly, these meetings are backed by data, providing proof to the employees that they are contributing to the greater good. Meade said her goal is for “the employees to see an immediate clear connection between their actions and how that impacts the reduction of our injuries, and to validate each employee’s efforts.” The results of the initiative have been dramatic — for more than seven months, there have been no fall-related injuries.

“These numbers make a big difference in terms of the score, the dollars we are reimbursed, our benefits program, and our ability to give an increase to our employees,” Meade added. “The data provided the proof so that we could show our employees that their actions are making a direct impact on our rating.” Words of encouragement, backed by data, can make a profound impact on worker satisfaction.

Setting metrics are just as important as letting employees know where they stand. Even though workers may not have reached 100%, reaching smaller goals shows employees they are making progress. The HBR study revealed that even minor progress, backed by proof, can boost employee’s feeling of working toward a common goal.

### **Use Data to Find Employee’s Strengths**

Helping employees feel supported in their work is another key factor in encouraging motivation. “This can be as simple as ensuring there are enough office supplies in a work station, to ensuring employees have access to educational opportunities,” said Tony Wehunt, Regional Vice President, Tara Cares.

Data can be used to help track employee’s strengths and help guide them to explore new areas of specialty. The ability to move into new positions is directly linked to education, and opportunities for advancement are a key factor in retention, according to a study on the health care industry by CareerBuilder.<sup>4</sup> To support their employee’s ambitions, Tara Cares created Tara University, an online education portal designed to support the employee’s goals.

### **Data Bring Rich Returns**

The power of big data comes from gathering information from a variety of sources, which can be tracked and used to create solutions that lead to better outcomes. Over time, the volume of data provides opportunities for comprehensive

analysis. Sharing data with employees is a way to build a partnership that improves employee performance, morale and recognition. Ultimately, this results in richer returns for patients and is reflected in the ratings.

“We use data to tell a story that quantifies the work that we’re doing,” said Hatten. “Communicating our success not only helps our employees improve, but it is an important way to create an atmosphere that ensures employees feel that it is a privilege to work here.”



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4. “More Than One Third of Employed Health Care Workers Plan to Look for a New Job This Year, CareerBuilder Health Care Study Reveals,” 2013, April 30, <http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?sd=4%2F30%2F2013&id=pr754&ed=12%2F31%2F2013>