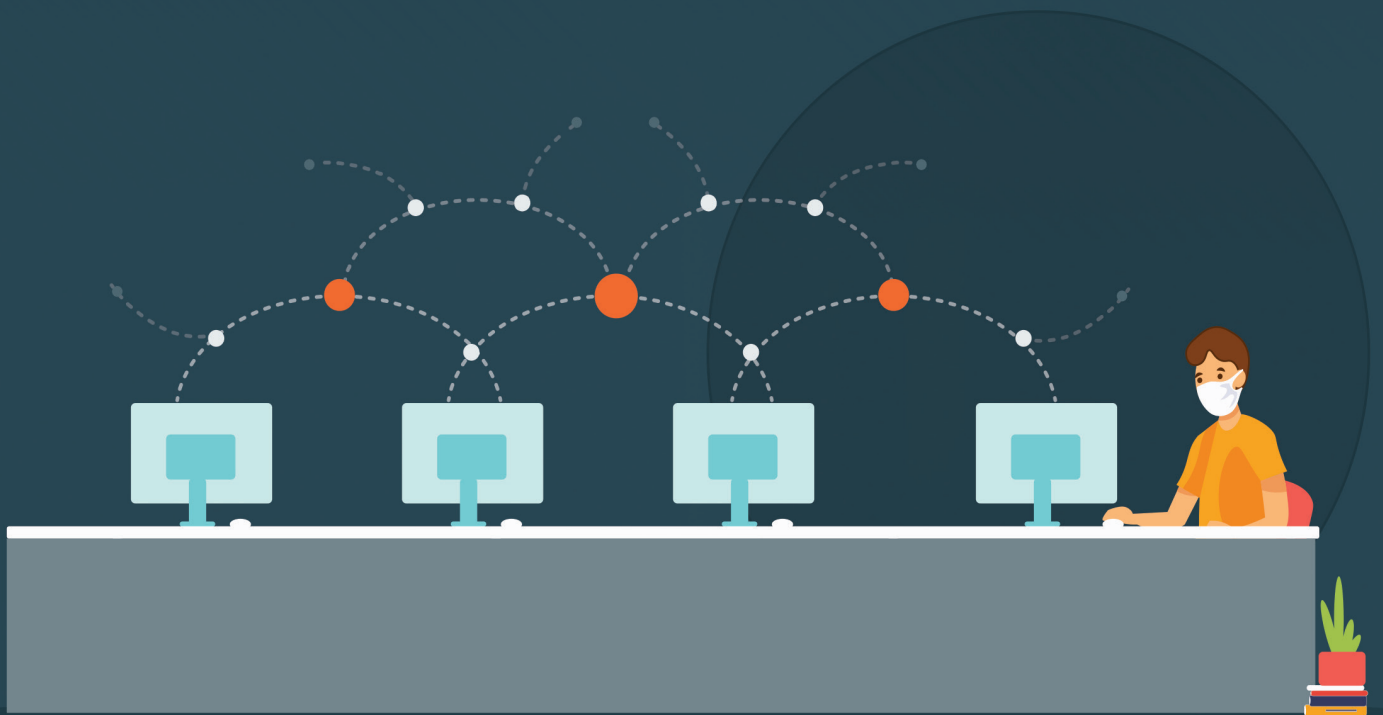


Managing the healthcare staffing crisis:

Sustainable strategies
to empower patients, retain
staff and drive efficiency



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Introduction

Industries nationwide continue to face a staffing crisis because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects are obvious: canceled flights, long lines at grocery stores and other businesses, layoffs and shutdowns. And the impact on the healthcare industry is no exception: extended wait times in emergency rooms and physicians' offices, canceled non-essential procedures, permanently shuttered hospitals and clinics.

However, healthcare's staffing crisis long pre-dates COVID-19, and there are many reasons why: aging Baby Boomers who need more care than ever; the growing prevalence of chronic diseases; and a limited number of new health-profession graduates to fill open positions and address these mounting patient needs.

In 2019, the Association of American Medical Colleges predicted that the U.S. would see a shortage of almost 122,000 physicians by 2032.¹ The American Association of Colleges of Nursing anticipated that the registered nurses' shortage also would intensify in coming years.² Administrative staff are typically even more difficult to hire and retain. Why? Healthcare organizations often compete for workers with other industries (e.g., food service, hospitality and manufacturing) that may be less demanding and offer greater flexibility. Plus, some healthcare administrative roles—particularly front-desk jobs—offer limited opportunities for career growth, making them less desirable for employees who want to earn more money over time.

Even so, healthcare organizations are not powerless at this critical tipping point, and they don't have to accept the staffing crisis as irrevocable.

Now is the time to understand what may be driving turnover at each individual organization and implement sustainable strategies to reverse the trend. Here's the secret: It's *not* about finding more people to do the work. Instead, the solution lies in retaining existing staff and helping them to work more efficiently. This means automating manual tasks whenever possible so staff can focus on providing high-quality patient care and improving the patient experience. It's about working smarter, not harder.

Here's another secret: Patients can help. As healthcare organizations seek to move the needle on employee retention, they can't overlook a critical team member—the patient. Patients are primed and ready to play a larger role in their healthcare journey, and organizations can seize the moment by embracing technology that supports a stellar patient experience, while simultaneously helping to alleviate the workload for clinicians and administrative staff.

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Facing the facts: Healthcare burnout is everywhere

As healthcare organizations try to identify sustainable strategies to retain their top talent, they must recognize and address one of the leading causes of the healthcare staffing crisis—burnout. Nearly 80% of physicians, for example, say they felt burned out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Additional pandemic-related responsibilities, new workflows and the daily reality of potential virus exposure have increased the stress and exhaustion already felt by so many providers. Burnout, in turn, can lead to lower quality care and medical errors, as well as the potential for care gaps, negative health outcomes and patient dissatisfaction.⁴

Though not as frequently measured, administrative staff burnout can be equally devastating for all types of healthcare organizations. Administrative employees must stay current with changing regulations, meet demanding productivity standards and work long hours, oftentimes with little recognition. Their jobs also typically require tedious manual tasks that drive burnout and disconnect them from their roles as patient advocates.

In any industry, burnout often precipitates employee turnover that can become difficult to manage. However, in the healthcare industry, frequent turnover can have catastrophic and cascading effects. For example, clinical staff turnover often means lost revenue and patient leakage—and the longer a clinical vacancy remains unfilled, the more profound the impact on the organization. Today, 94% of healthcare organizations say filling clinical staff vacancies continues to be a challenge. But administrative staff vacancies also hurt operations. Inadequate registration-desk coverage can lead to longer wait times and fuel patient dissatisfaction. Staffing gaps often force remaining administrative employees to take on more responsibility, sometimes with minimal training. This breeds staff frustration and often results in missed opportunities for meaningful patient engagement.



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Mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on the healthcare staffing crisis

Workers' health concerns and COVID-19 vaccine mandates have also exacerbated the healthcare staffing crisis. Currently, healthcare organizations are seeing voluntary turnover rates of close to 25% and rising.⁶ A 2021 *Washington Post*-Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that nearly 30% of healthcare workers are considering leaving their profession altogether.⁷



30% of healthcare workers considering leaving their profession

Source: Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation

As patient volumes continue to rebound, healthcare organizations must find ways to address this crisis in a sustainable way—by retaining and galvanizing their existing staff. This strategy applies to all types of institutions, both rural and urban, from small independent hospitals to large integrated-delivery networks.

In an era of cost containment, hiring *more* employees isn't a financially savvy decision. It's also not a sustainable approach in either the short- or long-term. In addition, there is one major barrier that cannot be overlooked: An inability to simply raise prices. Unlike other industries that can simply raise the price of goods and services to expand their workforce, healthcare organizations are largely bound by each payer's contracted rates, some of which may not even cover costs.

Understanding the staffing crisis at the individual-organization level

While there are many priorities simultaneously competing for healthcare executives' time and attention, none are more important than the current staffing crisis. Without people—particularly those who are knowledgeable and passionate about caring for patients—healthcare organizations cannot function. By investing in people, and especially by taking steps to mitigate burnout, organizations send a clear message: You matter, and we care about you. When organizations take care of their employees, employees can take better care of patients.⁸ With strong top-down support, they're able to focus on high-quality, coordinated patient care and improving the patient experience.

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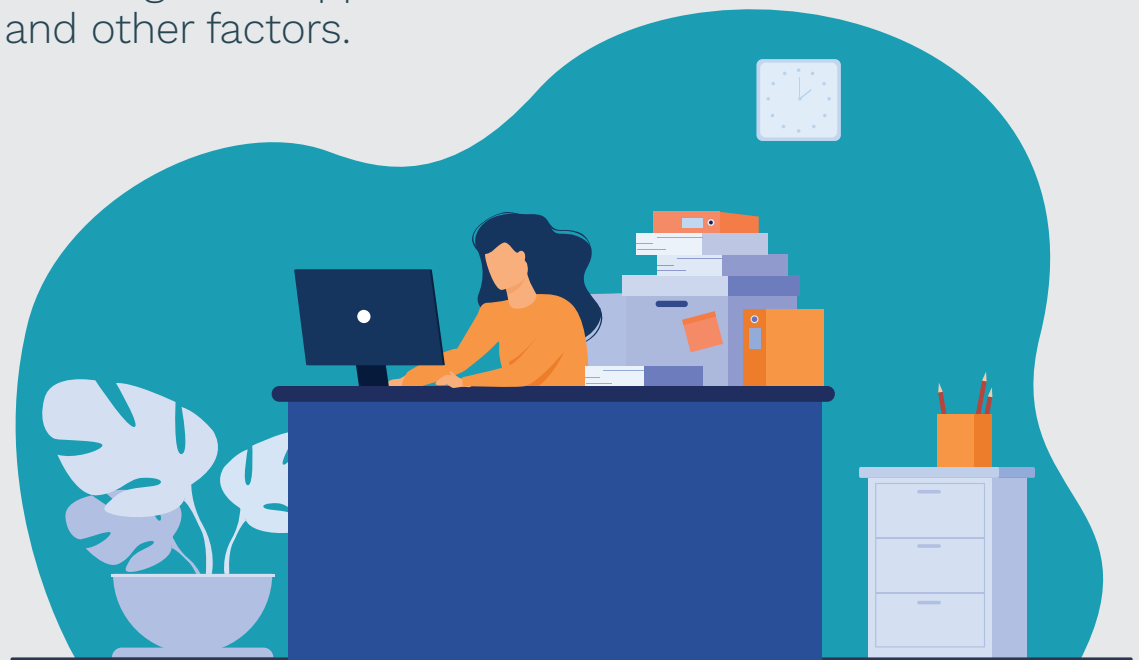
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However, in the quest to address burnout, each healthcare organization faces its own unique challenges that require unique solutions. For example, while one health system may struggle with inefficient workflows that require process-improvement initiatives, another may have ineffective managers who need more professional development and mentorship. Overall, more than a quarter of healthcare workers (28%) are considered a retention risk due to lack of recognition for their contributions, unfair compensation and/or limited opportunities for career growth and development.⁹

Healthcare leaders can find out what employees want and need by simply asking them. More specifically, they can measure employee satisfaction and investigate concerns using a variety of internal tools such as annual employee engagement surveys, open-listening channels, real-time pulse surveys and “stay interviews” during which managers ask long-term employees the following questions: Why do you stay with the organization? When was the last time you thought about leaving, and what prompted that thought? What can we do to make working here more enjoyable?

Leaders need to collect this data, implement new processes or other changes, and measure their subsequent success. Keep improving until the organization has achieved its goals. Then, set new goals as part of an ongoing commitment to employee well-being.

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Make the patient part of your administrative team

In the quest to hire more employees, it's easy to overlook a critical member of the administrative team: The patient. Consider using technology to empower patients and provide them with an in-demand, mobile-first experience while simultaneously reducing the administrative burden on physicians and staff.

Patients can take on a range of tasks, including:



Self-scheduling appointments



Completing intake on their mobile device



Reviewing and signing consent forms electronically



Paying at the time of service



Completing screenings for preventive health and SDOH



Reporting health outcomes



Completing patient satisfaction surveys



...and more

Creating a plan of action

Once healthcare organizations have a better understanding of the factors that contribute to employee turnover within their own walls, they can take both immediate and long-term steps to develop a healthy and productive work environment that promotes retention and high-quality patient care. Consider these 10 strategies:

1. Offer a comprehensive salary and benefits package. First step? Find out whether wages are competitive with other area healthcare facilities. If an organization is unwilling to match wage offers, it may lose staff to other institutions. This is particularly true for administrative roles. Consider using this [living wage calculator](#) to estimate the cost of living in each community or region where the organization has locations.¹⁰

Look at the benefits package, too. Does the organization pay for CEU opportunities to help staff reach their professional goals, even if it means they might move into new roles? Part-time remote work arrangements also are increasingly popular—can the organization offer at least some administrative staff that option? If so, be sure to implement clear performance metrics and provide novel engagement strategies such as messaging apps and internal resource libraries to empower independent work.

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2. Revamp the onboarding process.

Remember: First impressions matter. The onboarding process often can make or break an employee's desire and willingness to stay with the organization. Standardized onboarding supports employees as they step into new roles and responsibilities. This is especially true for compliance-heavy industries like healthcare that are governed by frequently changing rules and regulations. For example, a standardized onboarding process could use software that automates tasks, reminders and deadlines to ensure consistent, role-based training and education that sets employees up for success. The process might even include a mentorship or buddy program to help employees—particularly virtual ones—feel welcomed.

3. Promote staff health and wellness. Without happy and healthy employees, healthcare organizations cannot survive and thrive. That's why it's important to focus on staff members' emotional and physical well-being. As examples, an organization could provide ergonomic equipment to improve workstation comfort or offer gym membership discounts. Other useful investments might include free subscriptions to mindfulness apps and other mental-wellness tools and services. Perhaps most important of all, providing paid time off for mental wellness is crucial in a burnout-prone industry like healthcare. Being able to take time off for personal matters—specifically for mental-health appointments—can significantly boost employees' wellness and have a big impact on their well-being.

4. Equip managers to be sounding boards. Promoting staff health and wellness also means simply being there for employees when they need to talk. Perhaps someone they know is hospitalized with COVID-19, or they themselves are struggling with anxiety or depression. Ensure that managers are equipped to provide this type of support and know how to refer staff to employee assistance programs when appropriate.

5. Provide positive feedback. Sometimes all it takes is a “thank you for a job well done” to lift employees' spirits and remind them that they are important and bring value to the workplace. Managers can send personal or company-wide emails expressing gratitude and/or recognizing specific individuals for their efforts. Simple gifts also are a thoughtful sign of appreciation. It doesn't need to be a grand gesture. Gift cards for coffee or personalized notepads are easy and affordable ideas.



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6. Ask for staff input. When managers ask employees to share their thoughts, they send an important message: I value your opinion and want to hear what you have to say. Administrative staff may want to be involved in developing new workflows or bringing in technologies that affect their day-to-day responsibilities. In truth, they have insights into organizational processes that many others don't, because they work day in and day out to keep the administrative side of healthcare moving. Shared decision-making, collaboration and buy-in are critical to improving both employee retention and wellness.

7. Communicate regularly. Transparent communication is paramount during times of crisis and uncertainty. Healthcare organizations can employ a variety of tools to keep everyone in the loop, including online Q&As, leadership blogs or corporate newsletters. Simple face-to-face individual and small-group conversations are also effective ways to keep the lines of communication open. Remember, information is power. Informed employees are often more at ease and better able to focus on delivering high-quality patient care.

8. Set reachable goals. Setting unreasonable goals and expectations is one surefire way to exacerbate employee burnout. Instead, consider using the "SMART" method, which aims to establish goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based. For example, instead of saying, "We want to improve patient satisfaction scores," organization leaders might say, "We want to increase patient satisfaction scores by 20% in the next six months as part of our ongoing commitment to value-based care." To meet that goal, consider using automation to reduce staff's manual workload and free up more staff time for answering patients' questions.

9. Connect employees to the healthcare organization's mission. Helping employees understand their purpose and role relative to the organization's overall success—specifically, how they impact patient care and outcomes—can go a long way toward retaining top talent. In fact, staff who feel they are "living their purpose" at work have been shown to be four times more engaged with their jobs. In healthcare, employees can make a real difference in the lives of others, which is what draws many people to the industry. Organizations that can articulate their mission in job descriptions and through ongoing employee conversations are better able to prevent burnout and reduce turnover. For example, make sure that administrative staff understand that they are often "the face" of the organization—the first people with whom patients interact. They have a unique opportunity to put patients at ease as soon as they arrive and make them feel comfortable during an otherwise stressful time.

10. Automate workflows. Technology can enable patients to self-schedule appointments online, freeing up front-desk staff to answer patient questions and even cross-train to provide comprehensive coverage. Patient pre-registration for appointments is easier than ever, now that nearly everyone has a mobile device, supporting a more efficient check-in process. This allows registration staff to spend less time on data collection and more time improving the patient experience. Patients also can scan their own insurance cards, set up payment plans, leave a credit card on file and pay past-due balances on their own while waiting for their appointment. In addition, they can complete preventive health screenings and screenings for social determinants of health in advance of their appointment, giving physicians more time to inquire into their pressing health concerns and develop personalized treatment plans.

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Conclusion

As healthcare organizations grow, expand and take on an ever-increasing list of responsibilities, continuing to just hire more administrative staff is not the answer. Not only is it time-consuming to find and train qualified employees, it's also not feasible, given today's rigid reimbursement models. Healthcare organizations can't simply raise prices to afford more staff. Instead, they must focus on employee well-being and engagement to retain talent, while simultaneously leveraging automation to increase efficiency. To do this, they need technology that engages patients at every step in their healthcare journey.

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Phreesia gives healthcare organizations a suite of robust applications to manage the patient intake process. Our innovative SaaS platform engages patients in their care and provides a modern, convenient experience, while enabling healthcare organizations to optimize their staffing, boost profitability and enhance clinical care.

End Notes

- 1) <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/press-releases/new-findings-confirm-predictions-physician-shortage>
- 2) <https://www.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Fact-Sheets/Nursing-Shortage>
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