Healthcare Staff Engagement Goes in The Right Direction, Yet Challenges Remain

Healthcare workers are demonstrating increased engagement in their workplaces, marking a positive shift since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated by a [recent report by Press Ganey](). This report depicts findings from 2.2M responses collected from annual, pulse, and lifecycle surveys conducted by organisations that partner with Press Ganey, representing 395 health systems and 15,288 locations in calendar year 2023. This uptick in engagement numbers is to be welcomed, but much is still needed to navigate the challenges and hurdles on the way towards healthcare workers' well-being and an improved patient experience.

Workforce engagement: A mixed situation

Overall, there has been an improvement in workforce engagement metrics. In healthcare, 47% of roles saw better engagement compared to 2022, with 69% of employees now categorised as "engaged" or "highly engaged." Higher engagement correlates with better patient outcomes and staff retention. However, about a third of the workforce still reports low engagement, leading to negative effects such as lower patient satisfaction and increased turnover. Disengaged employees are twice as likely to leave, costing healthcare organisations around $25 million per year. Manager and clinical RN engagements have seen declines, highlighting the need for focused attention on these groups. Prioritising engagement through active listening and action is crucial, yet only 57% of healthcare employees feel their organisation acts on survey feedback.

Increasing staff retention is still a challenge

Hospitals worldwide face difficulties retaining talent due to the demanding nature of the healthcare industry. Long hours, emotional strain, and rising violence against caregivers contribute to the challenges. A significant portion of healthcare employees, particularly clinical RNs, leave organisations annually, with turnover costing approximately $1 million per 100 clinical RNs. Leader behaviours significantly impact retention, with stronger relationships reducing the likelihood of employees leaving by 44%. Investing in healthcare leaders is essential to enhance engagement, team experience, and staff retention.

Senior leadership fuels engagement and retention

Three of the top 10 key drivers of employee engagement directly relate to senior leadership:

1. Leadership demonstrates the organization's mission and values
2. Leadership promotes patient safety
3. Overall confidence in leadership

However, only 65% of employees reported confidence in senior leadership in 2023. While this is a slight improvement from 63% the previous year, confidence in senior leadership has emerged as a top key driver of engagement for 2024.

Trust, respect and teamwork pave the way towards higher engagement and loyalty

Feeling respected is identified as the primary driver of workforce engagement, surpassing perks and benefits. Organisations fostering cultures of trust, respect, teamwork, and inclusion observe higher engagement and loyalty levels. Respectful treatment establishes a silent contract of trust, crucial for retention. Top performers in engagement rate feel respected significantly more than bottom performers. Despite improvements, 26% of employees still feel their organisation lacks consistent respect. Cultivating a culture of ownership and breaking down silos through collaboration and communication positively impact respect perceptions and engagement levels. Acting on employee feedback is fundamental for building a respectful culture.

Staff expectations change, adaptability is key

As millennials become a significant part of the healthcare workforce, their unique needs and priorities must be addressed. They prioritise aspects such as respect, work-life balance, and career growth over traditional work ethics. Despite their growing presence, millennials rate their work experiences lower in engagement compared to non-millennials. Recognising these differences is crucial as generations shift, influencing the healthcare landscape. Millennials face distinct challenges such as the pandemic, increased violence against caregivers, and the integration of AI tools. As younger generations like Gen Z and Gen Alpha enter the workforce, adaptability to their needs and expectations will be essential.

Patient experience and employee experience go hand in hand

In healthcare, all aspects are interconnected, forming a cohesive Human Experience. Achieving high-quality patient care hinges on a unified and engaged workforce. Facilities with top workforce engagement are three times more likely to excel in patient experience. Respect also correlates with safety and patients' likelihood to recommend. Yet, many organisations operate in silos, creating fragmented plans that overlook these connections. Integrated strategies are key to success, as improvements in employee experience can cascade to enhance patient care and safety outcomes.

Suggestions for an integrated approach towards engagement

High-performing organisations prioritise employee engagement and continuous improvement, recognising the interconnectedness of employee and patient experiences, and safety. They view these elements as integral parts of the overall Human Experience. Without an integrated approach, organisations risk falling behind competitors. A concerted effort is needed to ensure all healthcare workers feel supported and empowered. Commitment to key strategies can drive meaningful change in the short and long term.

1. Elevating employee engagement and retention hinges on implementing an authentic listening strategy from day one. This involves regularly collecting, analysing, and acting on employee feedback through various channels such as pulse surveys, leader rounding, and crowdsourcing. Continuous feedback loops allow organisations to gain insight into workforce needs and drive meaningful change by actively incorporating employee input.
2. In healthcare, data segmentation is crucial due to the diverse and complex nature of the workforce. A personalised approach, considering factors like role, unit, tenure, shift, age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity, is essential for lasting change and empowerment. While national trends provide insights, analysing internal data allows organisations to tailor support to individual needs effectively. This personalised approach identifies who needs immediate assistance and determines the most impactful interventions.
3. To comprehensively grasp employees' experiences, it's crucial to integrate insights from patient experiences. Viewing data on patient and employee experiences separately creates blind spots that impede progress. A holistic approach is necessary to identify the most effective interventions and ensure they are implemented by the appropriate individuals and at the optimal times.
4. Building social capital is essential for fostering an outstanding employee experience, relying on connection, inclusion, and relationships. Standardised rounding practices, involving leaders engaging with staff at all levels, promote visibility and communication, facilitating prompt issue identification. Ongoing engagement cultivates trust, facilitates growth, and nurtures a culture conducive to overall well-being and success.
5. Utilise AI to expedite the extraction of insights from employee experience data. Technologies like natural language processing aid in deciphering unstructured data and textual feedback swiftly and accurately. AI then transforms these insights into actionable strategies, facilitating the immediate implementation of targeted improvements such as mitigating flight risk, enhancing engagement, and fortifying organisational resilience.
6. Establish comprehensive accountability throughout the organisation for crafting an exceptional employee experience. It involves everyone, from the C-suite setting the vision and investing in resources to front-line teams offering feedback for improvement. While feedback and data are vital, they alone are insufficient. A robust foundation, adequate resources, and shared ownership are essential for sustained impact. Regularly measuring outcomes is crucial for gaining insights into successes and areas that need improvement, preventing actions from losing effectiveness over time.

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