

A Cuke for

Retention Deficit Disorder

Strategies to address our workforce challenge

■ **Featuring Fred Horton, M.H.A., and Rose Wagner, RN, M.H.S., FACMPE**

The Great Resignation has hit health care particularly hard. In an industry already grappling with workforce shortages, the post-pandemic trend has created a crisis in many areas of the country. At a session during AMGA's 2021 virtual Innovation, Quality & Leadership Conference, AMGA Consulting's President Fred Horton, M.H.A., and Chief Operating Officer Rose Wagner, RN, M.H.S., FACMPE, discussed the challenges of employee retention and recruitment.

Opening the presentation, Horton addressed the collective mindset so many medical groups and health systems have assumed in regard to the multitude of workforce challenges being confronted of late. "I think everybody is struggling with how to work through the workforce issues we're all facing," he explained. "And I think everyone

wants a silver bullet. I grew up in South Dakota and had an opportunity to hunt from time to time, which has led me to a certain analogy. Instead of a silver bullet, really what we're looking at is what we use for

pheasant hunting, which is a shotgun. In a shotgun shell, you basically have a number of BBs that go out and attempt to hit the target. And I think what we're going to try to bring to you is a very comprehensive approach, one that's really getting to the basics and looking at a number of different ways—not just one—to manage through the current workforce challenges."

"My belief is everybody that got into health care ... for a reason. And I think that it's important that organizations really focus on that and get in front of the workforce again to talk about it."

—Fred Horton, M.H.A.

The Current Environment

Before introducing potential solutions to these challenges, Horton provided an overview of the current workforce environment. Casting an ever-present pall over the natural order of things is, of course, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Compounding matters has been the resulting general frustration and mental exhaustion because of the pandemic's effects on what used to be normal daily life. There is the polarization and politicization around COVID vaccinations. Paradigms have shifted with regard work mobility and the ability to do one's job remotely. There is inflation and scarcity in the market. More and more employees in all walks of life are simply resigning or retiring. Data shows that one in four workers is considering quitting their job after the pandemic.

A person wearing a white lab coat over a red shirt is holding a clipboard. The clipboard has a silver clip at the top and a white sheet of paper. On the paper, the word "QUIT" is written in black, with a horizontal line underneath it. Below the line, the phrase "like it here" is written in red cursive. The person's hands are visible, holding the clipboard from the sides.

QUIT

like it here

“Health care historically has been seen as a very safe place for employees,” said Horton. “I think we’ve benefited from that, and it’s been seen as largely recession-proof. It has been the place where we’ve had a lot of growth in this country. But now we’re seeing some challenges for that growth, I would say for the first time in my career.”

Responses from AMGA Members

Breaking down the impact into data points, Horton relayed the results of a pulse survey AMGA conducted of 89 member groups in August 2021. In regard to how COVID had impacted non-provider workforce,

individuals and train them, 12% began hiring over-qualified individuals to fill vacancies, 76% granted individuals the ability to work from home, and 58% relied on the costly option of using temporary staff. In order to retain non-provider staff, 80% are allowing those who can work from home to do so, 57% are providing flexible work hours, 15% are allowing job sharing, 31% are offering retention bonuses, and 75% have adjusted their pay scales. Other standalone tactics included a surprise bonus to all staff, as well as providing an additional day off per month for a mental health day.

Another survey question inquired whether the organizations were requiring employees to be vaccinated. The survey occurred before President Biden and his administration began implementing COVID vaccine mandates for any healthcare group, system, or facility that participates in Medicare and Medicaid programs. Before this emergency regulation, among the survey’s 89 respondents, 56% were

already requiring vaccinations, while 44% were not.

Finally, the survey inquired into the current vacancy rate for non-provider staff. Results showed an average of 20% and a median of 10%.

Ultimately, the findings reinforced just how serious and challenging workforce retention and recruitment has become in the healthcare field. Everyone is tired. People are more willing to leave health care than they have been in the past. And they are burnt out from feeling overworked as a result of staff shortages.

Crafting a Strategy

Shifting to a diagnostic perspective, Horton emphasized a back-to-basics approach. The first step of this pathway would be to commit to a bevy of organizational self-assessments through various tools and surveys, as well as reaffirming the group’s mission, values, and compact.

“If you haven’t conducted surveys of your employees, we would suggest that that is a really important step,” said Horton. “You want to understand where they’re at, where they are with burnout, where they’re at with perceptions of the work environment. You want to review your diversity, what your goals are, where you’re at in achieving your goals, monitoring your turnover rates so you can develop action plans. And then, as always, measuring and monitoring the improvement and then rerunning the cycle. It’s all hands on deck. Review the organization’s purpose again. My belief is everybody that got into health care, whether they provide direct care, whether they are a provider, whether they’re an executive or in management or in support staff, they chose it for a reason. And I think that it’s important that organizations really focus on that and get in front of the workforce again to talk about it.”

The next step from Horton’s perspective is to secure recruitment and retention strategies. According to a Gallup study¹ conducted early in 2021, approximately 48% of the American workforce was looking to change jobs, and the three top reasons for this occupational shift among those surveyed were (1) they did not see opportunities for development, (2) they did not feel connected to the company’s purpose, and (3) they did not have strong relationships at work.

Table 1
Employees who are looking for a job or watching for opportunities

	September 2019	March 2021
Actively Disengaged	69%	74%
Not Engaged	51%	55%
Engaged	29%	30%
Total	46%	48%

Source: Gallup, Sept. 2019, March 2021

83% of respondent groups reported that they had resignations, 63% had retirements, 92% admitted to difficulty recruiting staff, and 91% had staff advocating to work remotely. Comments included a generalized fear and anxiety of simply doing their jobs, concerns regarding increased stress, burnout, and work-life balance, as well as arguments pertaining to vaccine acceptance.

In regard to what organizations were doing to recruit non-provider staff for difficult-to-fill positions, 55% of respondents said they offered sign-on bonuses, 47% decided to hire less-qualified

With these revelations in mind, Wagner emphasized that the retention of an employee begins with the recruitment—the hiring process that candidates go through from their very initial contact.

“Now more than ever, candidates are interested in the culture of the organization, as well as diversity and inclusion,” said Wagner. “Diversity has become a very hot topic and a major priority in organizations today. But it involves more than just hiring diverse talents. There has to be an intentional focus on the employee’s journey, how it differs from their lived experience, and creating an atmosphere of belonging and inclusion.”

The Hiring Process

One way to make the hiring process something meaningful is to establish a steering committee, one that can talk upfront about what attributes they’re looking for in the open position. Once there is agreement on what those desired attributes are, interview questions should be standardized so that each candidate is asked the same set of questions, establishing consistency in messaging for both sides of the interview process. The specifics of those agreed-upon questions and discussion points should highlight those greater points of influence for the candidate.

“The culture should be talked about so that candidates have a good feel for what it is like at the organization they may be joining,” asserted Wagner. “Give a realistic view of what the job entails, what the duties will be so that there’s no surprises. It doesn’t help to hold back information from candidates. It’s better to be transparent and truthful with the candidates because it’ll come out eventually anyway.”

This transparency should also come into play when communicating a candidate’s potential within

the organization and their equitable development, so they can see the tools, training, and resources that will be available to them to be successful. This includes opportunities of mentorship, articulating and communicating a clear path to advancement, and even creating whole new positions.

Onboarding

The time period between an offer being accepted and the official start date of a new candidate can be a critical juncture to maintain the new hire’s sense of excitement and engagement. Wagner encouraged leadership to make incoming employees feel welcome by taking them out to lunch, having them stop by the office for a one-on-one tour, and facilitating any paperwork ahead of time.

Onboarding is also key. During the first few weeks of employment, time should be allotted for hires to meet with their direct reports, meet with their peers, and have 30-, 60-, and 90-day check-ins with their supervisors, as well as goals for each of those time periods.

Most importantly, but often overlooked, Wagner said, “Try to get them involved and connected to the community. This is especially relevant if people are coming from out of town. It’s also one of the reasons why individuals leave if they don’t feel an established connection to the community. If their family isn’t feeling integrated in the area, it may make them want to leave as well.”

Agility Is Key

Horton and Wagner assert that the recruitment environment of our nation’s medical groups and

health systems are experiencing a hyper-dynamic shift, and to stay competitive in this difficult marketplace, organizations will need to substantially increase their appeal to attract and retain top talent.

“In my opinion, AMGA members offer the best and brightest workplaces for employees in the country,” stated Horton. “Members have built solid reputations and must continue to develop their cultures and differentiate their organizations. By building upon your reputations and being vigilant in listening to and engaging your employees, you can create a sustainable strategic advantage.”

“Candidates can and are interviewing at more places,” said Wagner. “So it’s really important that if you identify someone you like, to move as quickly as possible. At the same time, with more interviewees, it’s broadened the candidate pool and has allowed for a more diverse slate of candidates.” **GRJ**

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Fred Horton and Rose Wagner will be sharing more strategies in a Pre-conference Immersion Session at AMGA’s 2022 Annual Conference, March 9–12, 2022, in Las Vegas. Their session, “Heavy Lifting: Managing Medical Group Compensation and Financial Performance,” will feature case studies and best practices from AMGA members and insights from AMGA experts. Find out more at amga.org/ac22.

References

1. V. Gandhi and J. Robison. 2021. The “Great Resignation” Is Really the “Great Discontent.” Gallup Workplace, July 22, 21. Accessed November 19, 2021 at gallup.com/workplace/351545/great-resignation-really-great-discontent.aspx.