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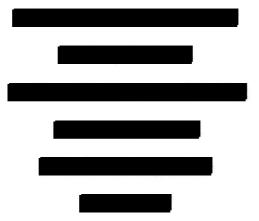https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_projects/846

Nurses' work environment perceptions: Key elements to retention

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De la Cuesta.

Abstract

A study of work environment perceptions among today's multi-generational registered nursing workforce provides suggestions to enhance job satisfaction and improve retention.

As the registered nurses' (RNS) work environment continues to exist in an increasingly complex and challenging setting, nurses are leaving the hospital setting in pursuit of more flexible, less stressful milieus. The varied settings in which healthcare services are rendered require improved techniques for recruiting and retaining nurses as well as decreasing costs related to turnover. An enhanced understanding of nurses' perceptions of their current work environment and their implications could be used to develop new strategies for recruiting and retaining nurses.

Job Satisfaction

The high turnover rate in the nursing profession has plagued the profession for many years. While numerous factors have been linked with turnover, job satisfaction is the most often cited.[1] There is a demonstrated association between the attributes of the clinical practice environment and nurse and patient outcomes; the greater the control the nurses reported having in the practice setting, the higher the rates of patient and nurse satisfaction with care and the job.[2] Turnover, productivity, and job performance are extremely important issues in today's economic climate, and nurses' satisfaction has been shown to be related to all three. Satisfaction is negatively related to employee turnover; as satisfaction decreases, turnover increases. Turnover is a serious problem in part because of its relationship to decreased quality of care and extra expense for employers.[3-5] Research has shown that nurse retention is directly related to job satisfaction, and nurses' job satisfaction is a main predictor of retention.[6]

Work Environment

Staff nurses base their decision to leave or stay in an organization on their perception of various features of the work environment. These job related characteristics include: (a) level of

autonomy, (b) interactional features such as support and feedback, and (c) organization-specific features such as advancement and benefits.[7] Nurse managers who create working environments that foster trust, provide support and enable nurses to accomplish their work will increase their nurses' job satisfaction and organizational commitment, leading to higher retention rates.[8]

Our Aging Nurses

The average age of registered nurses in the United States has increased substantially from 37.4 years, in 1983, to 44.5 years, in 2000, while the workforce as a whole has aged only 2 years during this same period.[9,10] Consequently, the average age of RNs currently employed continues to climb, and most middle-aged RNs born during the "Baby Boom" generation who dominate the nursing workforce will reach retirement between 2005 and 2010.[11] This means that the most experienced nurses, mainly middle-aged women, will be leaving the profession at an alarming rate and at a time when demand is high.[12] It is vital to understand how perceptions of the work environment influence nurses' satisfaction as they continue to age and navigate through their nursing careers.

The Multi-generational Nursing Workforce

Never before has our workforce been so dissimilar related to generational stages and at the same time been asked to *work together*. Today's workplace is a mixture of opposing voices and beliefs creating the most varied workforce our nation has ever encountered.[13]

The diverse ages of RNs currently working represent a multi-generational nursing work force that has widely varying perceptions, values, and beliefs about the nature of the work place environment. Whether or not those in leadership agree with nurses may be irrelevant. The fact of the matter is that nurses' perceptions *are* their reality.[14] Ultimately, the retention of our RNs is

dependent on maintaining the equilibrium of the incentives and job satisfaction of nursing juxtaposed to other competing opportunities.[15]

This multi-generational nursing workforce is comprised of four specific age groups: (a) Veterans 1922-1943, those born before World War II, (b) Baby Boomers 1943-1960, those born during or after World War II, (c) Generation Xers 1960-1980, those born after the Baby Boomers, and (d) Generation Nexters 1980-2000, those born of the Baby Boomers and initial Generation Xers. These four generations possess: (a) distinct work ethics, (b) different viewpoints on work, (c) diverse and preferred ways of managing and being managed, (d) distinctive styles, and (e) unique ways to view such work-world issues as quality and service.[16]

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the acute care staff nurses' perceptions of the work environment and to examine those perceptions for differences among the multi-generational nursing workforce.

Conceptual Framework

To describe components of the work climate, Moos conceptualized the organizational system as a dynamic system composed of four components: (a) physical features, (b) structure/policies, (c) suprapersonal and the work task factors, and (d) work climate.[17] The conceptual framework integrates concepts from three major perspectives on the workplace: (a) the human relations approach, (b) the sociotechnical perspective, and (c) social information processing orientation.

Research Methodology

Packets (N=692) containing: (1) letter of introduction, (2) a consent, (3) instruments including the Moos Work Environment Scale (WES) Form R,[18] and a short demographic survey,

(4) a two dollar coupon for the hospital snack cart, and (5) a stamped, return envelope were distributed by the nursing managers to all acute care staff nurses on all shifts. The subjects were asked to complete the instruments on their own time, estimated to take 20 minutes, and then to mail them back to the university researchers. The Moos Work Environment Scale (WES) Form R, was used to measure perceptions of the work climate rather than the perception of job characteristics or tasks.[19] The WES instrument is a 90-item true/false questionnaire that measures 10-area profiles which are grouped into three major dimensions of the work environment: (a) relationships, (b) personal growth/goal orientation, and (c) system maintenance/system change. Each subscale has its own normed mean range based on a 0-9.0 scale.[20]

The demographic instrument included an item on age. Nurses were asked to identify themselves into nine-year age groups. The respondents were then grouped into the identified multi-generational age categories.

Secondary data analysis was performed on data collected by a state university School of Nursing in 2002 at a large government hospital. Analyses consisted of frequencies and percents for the demographic data, and mean scores for the Moos' Work Environment Scale subscales. The t test was used to compare the perceptions of the work environment for the Generation Xers (age 20-39) and Baby Boomers (age 40-59) age groups.

Results

The total number of returned questionnaires provided a sample size of 272 (39%) coded acute care staff nurses. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the nurse respondents were women, Baby Boomers in their 40s, Caucasian, and they had been in the nursing profession for more than ten years. The Generation Xers (n=71) were identified as ages 20-39, the Baby Boomers

(n=190) were ages 40-59. Due to the small sample of Veteran nurses (n=10) they were excluded from further analyses (See Table 1). There were no Nexters.

Moos' Work Environment subscales were examined using t tests for the age groups 20-39 (Generation Xers) and 40-59 (Baby Boomers) to evaluate differences between groups. Five out of the ten subscales demonstrated statistical significance (p<.05) between the two age groups. The first statistically significant subscale, Involvement, represents how connected the employee feels to the organization and his or her level of job commitment.[21] The involvement subscale also includes: (a) verbalizing workplace concerns, (b) participating as a team member to improve the work setting, (c) developing solutions to the problems in the work environment that increase satisfaction within the organization, and (d) supporting the employee who perceives he or she is detached or left out from participating in decisions.[22] The Generation Xers reported a mean of 6.79, which fell just below the above average category. The Baby Boomers reported a mean of 6.12 which is slightly above the normed average range of 5.5 to 6.5. This indicated that neither group perceived their workplace involvement to be above average, a score of 7.0 and higher.

The Supervisor Support subscale of the WES reflects the level to which management/supervisors are supportive of the employee, encourage the support of other employees and how often supervisors compliment the employee who does something well.[23] Supervisor Support is also viewed as managers who: (a) are visible within the workplace, (b) approachable at all times, (c) give full credit to the employee who contributes ideas, and (d) provide opportunities for employees to examine the impact of their workplace on morale which can increase the employees' feeling of supervisor support.[24] The Generation Xers reported mean was 5.2, below the normed average range of 5.5 to 6.0. The Baby Boomers reported 4.3, well

below average. The findings suggest that both generations perceive insufficient supervisor support.

The WES Autonomy subscale measures the extent to which employees are encouraged to be self-sufficient and to make their own decisions.[25] Autonomy focuses on: (a) how much freedom the employee has to do as they like, (b) how much the employee is encouraged to make their own decisions, (c) does the employee use their own initiative to do things, and (d) what impact does it have on the employees' level of productivity.[26] The Generation Xers reported mean was 5.7, which is average (range 5.0 to 6.0). The Baby Boomers reported mean was 4.9 which was slightly below average.

The Task Orientation subscale of the WES taps the degree of emphasis on good planning, efficiency, and getting the job done. It also measures how much attention people pay to getting work done, how often things get put off until tomorrow, and workplace efficiency and task-oriention.[27] The Generation Xers reported mean was above average at 7.1. The Baby Boomers reported mean was just at average at 6.5 (range 6.5 to 7.0). Employees who work within an environment which has refined systems in place to facilitate the completion of tasks, could report a higher level of job satisfaction due to low levels of barriers.[28]

The WES subscale, Innovation, measures the degree of emphasis on variety, change and new approaches, such as: (a) whether doing things in a different way is valued, (b) whether new and different ideas are tried out, and (c) whether the workplace is receptive to try out a new idea.[29] The Generation Xers reported mean was 4.3, within the normed average range of 4.0 to 5.0. The Baby Boomers reported mean was 3.5, below average. Employees who possess the ability to move forward and implement change are valuable as these innovative changes can improve the workplace milieu, hence increasing job satisfaction.[30]

No statistically significant differences in the nurses' perceptions were found for the two age groups on the following subscales of the WES: (a) Peer Cohesion, (b) Work Pressure, (c) Clarity, (d) Control, and (e) Physical Comfort. Limitations of this study include: (a) one hospital type in one geographical location, (b) small sample size, and (c) economic context. Data were collected during an economic downturn.

The findings of this study suggest several areas of interest to nurse managers. The Generational Xers continually assess relationship dimensions within their job and those relationships with the nurse manager. Generation Xers expect involvement, peer cohesion and a lot of supervisor support. Baby Boomers have high expectations in the relationship dimension as well, but are much less vocal about their expectations. Both Generation Xers and Baby Boomers value autonomy within their practice, good planning and minimal work stressors. Generation Xers will expect to have systems in place to get the job done and the Baby Boomers years of nursing experience can make that happen within the unit. Baby Boomers expect policies and procedures to govern their work environment and often are the nurses who develop them. However, technology and innovation are not something the Baby Boomers embrace. Generation Xers are comfortable with technology and innovation, actually the more the better. Generation Xers are well suited to support and teach the Baby Boomers that innovation can be an asset rather than a liability.[31]

Discussion

In order to promote nurses' job satisfaction and to improve upon the perception of the staff nurses' work environment, collaboration among the generations is the foundation for positive change. The savvy manager will approach RNs with an awareness that each of the generations think about and perceive work differently. Understanding these inherent differences

and addressing the primary work expectations of the members of each of these generations will assist managers to enhance the job satisfaction of employees.[32] Providing opportunities to increase staff nurse involvement include encouraging the staff nurse to participate in making organizational decisions and unit-based policy decisions which sends the message, "we value you and your expertise." An example of this would be a unit specific advisory committee, where staff nurses of all ages: (a) share the ranges of their clinical work experiences, (b) implement changes in their working environment with confidence, and (c) are encouraged for their efforts at innovation by their managers and organizational leaders. Generation Xers enjoy challenging work projects and take pride in the efforts they put forth. However, they do not like to be micromanaged. The Baby Boomers want to be involved and are offended if they are not asked to participate. Baby Boomers care about their work environment through active participation and value team building.[33]

Generation Xers expect supervisor support in the workplace to consist of the manager making time for them to listen to concerns and provide positive feedback regarding their performance. Generation Xers desire to be connected to the organization and flourish in an environment that acknowledges their contributions. Historically, Baby Boomers put work before family and work is a large component of who they are. Baby Boomers look to managers to publicly recognize and give credit to their innovative ideas. Managers who personally acknowledge the Baby Boomer's outstanding job performance will satisfy the Baby Boomers expectations for supervisor support. Both of these generations expect to see the manager stepping in to help with the workload and "an open door policy".[34]

Generation Xers have been described as pessimistic and selfish, and depicted as having no work ethic.[35] Despite the misinformation, Generation Xers are healthcares best attribute.

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They are an important commodity in the delivery of quality and service, because they value autonomy and drive their workplace destiny. Generation Xers are highly independent workers, comfortable with change and with problem solving. Baby Boomers value autonomy as well and are learning to seek more independence, work well with clearly stated goals, and thrive when allowed to take risks. Autonomy allows them to determine how to perform the job in combination with support and communication from the manager.[36]

In addition, Baby Boomers are concerned about the systems in place to get the work done, enjoy reviewing the workplace structures and systems in place, and are interested in getting the job done, i.e., organization of the necessary tasks is high on their list.[37] They desire a fair and level playing field where everyone must do their part and appreciate efficient systems in place to minimize redundant tasks, increasing their job satisfaction. Generation Xers grew up with the introduction of the personal computer (PC) and this advancement in technology changed the way they process and receive information. Generation Xers believe strongly in computer technology and its ability to synthesize diverse information to facilitate improved patient care. Despite advanced technological capabilities through computers, Generation Xers need honesty from the manager that certain repetitive tasks are purely a part of the job. Even tasks that require only moderate skills and cannot be automated through a PC can be done well. It may be necessary to remind the Generation Xer that many skills require human interventions versus computer automated remedies.[38]

Creating an innovative work environment where the Baby Boomer is encouraged to share their years of experience adds meaning to their work and sends the message that they are appreciated. Managers who value doing things in different ways and trying out new and unusual ideas should include the Baby Boomer in the process. Baby Boomers' expertise would be best

utilized within a unit-based performance improvement committee, where the Baby Boomers role is mentor.[39] Generation Xers enjoy new approaches to doing things. They often will include technology in some aspect of the change and acknowledging the Generation Xers futuristic philosophy is key to retaining this group.[40] Generation Xers expect the workplace to be flooded with variety and technological advances. They expect the nurse manager to volunteer their units(s) to be the first place to try out a new idea. When a workplace embodies an openness to change, employees tend to feel more challenged in their work and tend to be more satisfied with their job.[41]

Conclusion

Focusing on building a work environment that is satisfactory to the staff nurse is a challenge. No longer are years of seniority used to corroborate nurse's competencies, and one cannot presume job satisfaction is founded on years of service. Now is the time when unique nursing generations are working together, side-by-side, striving to be valued for the unique set of generational characteristics they bring to the workplace environment.

As seen between the two generations on the WES subscales, the nurse manger and nurse educator can promote retention by: (a) being a passionate promoter of the nursing staff, because having a strong nursing leader *empowers* nurses, (b) taking inventory of your nursing staff to reveal your unit's multi-generational make-up, (c) executing actions to meet those nurses' needs, (d) offering a variety of career advancement opportunities, (e) identifying each nurse's expertise and fostering it in the work environment, (f) creating an environment of respectful collaboration, (g) recognizing staff nurses with professional development opportunities, and (h) exploring the work environment of your nursing units and querying the staff nurses' opinions on ways to improve upon it.

Without thoughtful intervention related to retention, the critical nursing shortage facing the United States today will not only continue but will worsen. Strategies focused on retaining unique generations of nurses both within the unit and in the hospital are essential. By increasing RN job satisfaction, patient satisfaction also may improve. In addition, retaining RNs by enhancing the work environment and improving nurse job satisfaction will decrease the organizational costs of staff turnover.

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Table 1. *Staff Nurse Background Characteristics (N=272)*

Category	Frequency (*n*)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Females	260	95.6
Males	12	4.4
Age Groups		
20-39 years of age	71	26.1
40-59 years of age	190	69.9
> 60 years of age	10	3.7
Missing data	1	.4
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	0.4
African American	6	2.2
Hispanic	12	4.4
Asian-Non Filipino	56	20.6
Caucasian	118	43.4
Other & Missing data	9	4.8
Marital Status		
Married	176	65.7
Separated/Divorced	28	10.4

Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Widowed	4	1.5
Single	60	22.4
Highest Level of Education Completed		
Associate Degree	63	23.9
BSN	143	54.2
Masters Degree (any field)	7	2.7
Seniority		
5 years or less	56	20.7
6-10 years	35	13.0
11-15 years	34	12.6
16 or more years	145	53.7

Note. Numbers do not sum to N=272 due to missing data.

Table 2. Mean WES Subscale Scores and *t* Test results for Generation Xers and Baby Boomers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	*t*	Sig. (2-tailed)
Involvement				2.27	.02
20-39	71	6.79	1.97		
40-59	190	6.12	2.19		
Supervisor Support				2.56	.01
20-39					
40-59	71	5.15	2.38		
	190	4.29	2.43		
Autonomy				3.04	.00
20-39	71	5.69	1.54		
40-59	190	4.88	2.04		
Task Orientation				2.15	.03
20-39					
40-59	71	7.08	1.88		
	190	6.49	2.03		
Innovation				2.38	.02
20-39	71	4.27	2.21		
40-59	190	3.47	2.47		

Note. Out of the 10 WES Subscales, five subscales were found to be statistically

significant (<.05) between the two age groups.

Research Box

| **Purpose** |
| The purpose of this study was to investigate the acute care staff nurses' perceptions of the work environment and to examine those perceptions for differences among the multi-generational nursing workforce. |
| **Location** |
| Large government hospital, Northern California. |
| **Time Frame** |
| Nurses were asked to complete the instruments on their own time, estimated to take 20 minutes, and then mail them back to the university researchers. |
| **Demographics/Population** |
| Acute care registered nurses (RNs) on all shifts within inpatient nursing units. (See Table 1 for staff nurse demographic data) |
| **Data Collection** |
| Materials included: (1) letter of introduction, (2) a consent, (3) instruments including Moos Work Environment Scale (WES) Form R, [42] and a short demographic survey, (4) a two dollar coupon for the hospital snack cart, and (5) a stamped, return envelope were distributed by nurse managers. |
| **Sample Size** |
| Population: N=692; Sample n=272; Response rate: 39%. |
| **Significance** |
| Managers and educators can enhance staff nurses' perceptions of their work environment by exploring their units' multi-generational expectations and characteristics; thus improving job satisfaction and retention. |