Recruit, Retain, Assess Technology’s Role in Diversity

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With the worsening nursing shortage and increasingly diverse patient population, nursing can no longer afford to maintain its traditional homogeneity. This article will discuss how information technology is playing and can play a role in recruiting, retaining, and assessing diversity in nursing.

Key words: diversity, informatics, information technology, nursing shortage, recruitment

THE TIMES THEY AREN’T A’CHANGING

According to recent statistics (year 2000) published in the National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses¹ (conducted by the Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions, Division of Nursing), a mere 5% of the nation’s nurses are African Americans and a paltry 2% are Hispanic. Judging by an analysis of student populations in nursing schools, the situation is not going to change anytime soon—in 2001, 91% of nursing students were female and 73.5% had Caucasian, nonethnic backgrounds. Since females make up 51% of the overall population and minority groups account for nearly a third, the disparity between these 2 sets of numbers does not bode well for the profession as a whole.

BUSINESS BENEFITS OF A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

The availability of healthcare data on the Internet has resulted in higher health literacy among consumers, who are, in turn, making more informed choices and becoming more active participants in their own care. As this evolving trend of “consumerism” in healthcare drives hospitals and clinics to actively compete with each other just to maintain market share, building a workforce that is

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¹ National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions, Division of Nursing, 2000.
reflective of the diversity within the community becomes more than a moral or ethical high road, it becomes a business imperative. An organization that values diversity and works actively to build and maintain a culture of diversity among nursing staff can expect to reap the following financial advantages:

- **Fewer staff shortages.** According to the latest projections from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, as published in the February 2004 issue of *Monthly Labor Review*, more than 1 million new and replacement nurses will be needed by 2012. Nursing schools are also feeling the crunch as faculty members retire, leaving crucial teaching positions unfilled. Organizations that successfully implement measures to attract nontraditional workers can expect to suffer few side effects from the national shortage.

- **Increased market share.** Minority populations actively seek out providers who can understand their cultural differences and/or address them in their native tongues. Hospitals can no longer afford to ignore the unique needs of various minority populations or to create marketing messages that large segments of the community cannot relate to.

- **Improved quality of care.** A vast body of research overwhelmingly shows that outcomes improve and compliance rates are higher when there is effective and meaningful communication between the patient and the provider. A bilingual and diverse workforce can significantly improve patient communication and education efforts, not only by overcoming language barriers, but also by providing culturally congruent care to populations that include large numbers of Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, etc. Furthermore, diversifying the workforce can reduce nursing staff shortages, which are known to contribute to medical errors.

In addition to pumping up the bottom line, diversifying nursing staff can enhance the profession as a whole, especially when it comes to recruiting males. Jobs that are gender-stereotyped as being primarily suitable for women do not tend to attract people who are motivated by money and prestige when making career decisions. Drawing more men to the field of nursing can help to raise the pay scale and overall standing of the profession.

**USING THE INTERNET TO GET THE WORD OUT**

In addition to recruiting practices that reach diverse populations, nursing administrators have a responsibility to contribute to efforts to change the public perception of the profession, at the very least by working with the organization’s communications, human resources, and marketing departments to ensure all printed and Web materials (including patient information materials) present inclusive images—photos of minorities and men in active nursing roles. When it comes to disseminating information to target audiences, the strategic use of technology is crucial. As a case in point, Johnson and Johnson launched a multimedia initiative in February 2002 to promote careers in nursing—and a key component is a Web site (www.discovernursing.com) geared toward middle and high school age students. It includes over a hundred profiles of nurses of diverse gender and ethnic origins, in all types of specialized position (forensics, informatics, nurse practitioner, etc), written in an engaging manner. Also included are user-friendly databases that make it easy for students to search for a suitable nursing school and scholarship opportunities.

The Internet is also a uniquely well-suited tool for recruiting. Employers in all industries are turning to the Internet instead of print advertising and it’s estimated that more than 500,000 jobs are posted on the largest career sites everyday. Internet postings are an affordable way to reach millions of candidates; they’re available around the clock and around the world. Besides the well-known career sites like Monster.com, there are a number
of sites specifically designed to reach minorities, including hirediversity.com and diversityworld.com. Other sites that are geared toward minorities are less well known but also offer job listings and recruitment marketing services. These include the following:

- National Urban League (www.nul.org)
- Black Career Women (www.bcw.org)
- The Black World Today (www.tbwt.com)
- Saludos.com
- Hispanic Employment Program (www.hepm.org)
- Hispanic Online (www.hisp.com)
- Jobaccess.org
- Nativejobs.com

There is also a need for healthcare administrators to ensure that their organizations’ own Web sites speak to jobseekers from diverse backgrounds and proactively position the organization as an equal opportunity employer. At the very minimum, sites should supplement descriptions and requirements for open positions with

- a diversity mission statement that describes the organization’s commitment to building a diverse workforce;
- profiles of minority employers and managers, accompanied by photos; and
- information on contracts with minority-owned suppliers and vendors; awards or endorsements bestowed by minority-oriented organizations; mentoring programs within the organization; etc.

Internet-based technologies, when fully utilized, allow for a wide variety of useful recruiting strategies—for example, generating an immediate, automated e-mail response to each candidate who responds to a posted position.

**DISTANCE LEARNING CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYEE RETENTION**

When it comes to bridging the gender gap in nursing, much of the responsibility belongs to nursing schools, which should be proactively seeking to steer more males into the nursing education pipeline. Recruiting materials must be created to present the more “rugged” face of nursing—jobs in emergency rooms and trauma centers, as certified nurse anesthetists, etc.

Keeping male nurses from making career changes as they start families and shoulder more financial responsibility should also be a primary goal of nursing administrators. As heads of households, men tend to value high salaries and opportunities for advancement, and so should be encouraged to move into management and administration whenever appropriate. And once again, technology can help—a record number of nursing education programs offer distance learning as a way for nurses to earn advanced degrees and build new skill sets while working, without the need to relocate.

**MONITORING YOUR EFFORTS—INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IS THE ANSWER**

A true commitment to obtaining diversity within the workforce includes continuous efforts to refine methodologies. However, it’s difficult to improve anything that is not routinely measured, and so metrics must be built into recruiting systems. Colleges and universities typically monitor diversity within student populations over the years through the use of a diversity scorecard, a data-driven tool that looks at success rates in areas such as outreach, enrollment, turnover, and academic excellence. It’s time for nursing to apply this practice to its own academic institutions.

Many large, diversity-committed employers also use the diversity scorecard to analyze the state of equity in employee recruitment, retention, and performance. To chart, track, and aggregate relevant data, technology once again comes into play. Currently, there are only a small handful of turnkey (“out of box”) solutions that automate the process of measuring recruitment activities and forecasting the time it will take to accomplish a diversity initiative according to set benchmarks. There is a need not only for customizable programs
that will do the job with a higher level of detail, but also for solutions that are specific to the unique needs of the healthcare industry and can track the success rate of specific departments within the organization, including nursing. Specific areas of diversity initiatives that can—and should—be measured include the following:

- **Outreach.** There are various ways to track the success of outreach efforts to diverse job candidates. Among the simplest is resume tracking—of all resumes collected, how many reflect nontraditional applicants? It’s also possible to track by number of interviews, number of job offers made, and number of hires.

- **Retention.** Tracking the turnover rate of nontraditional workers (usually within their first year or two of employment) and comparing it to the turnover rate of all new hires can reveal fundamental flaws that make the organization unappealing to gender or ethnically diverse staff members.

- **Performance.** How do annual employee evaluations of minority workers compare to evaluations of all new hires? If there is a wide disparity, studies must be done to pinpoint reasons for performance problems. Supervisor satisfaction with individual employees and the employee’s own job satisfaction can also be monitored with an eye toward improving working conditions for minority staff.

**THE NEW FACE OF NURSING**

Nursing is primarily about caring. As the nation’s population becomes more diverse, an equally diverse nursing workforce is essential to providing care that meets the needs of all cultural and ethnic groups. Despite their current small percentage, nurses from minority groups are significant contributors to the healthcare system and role models for future generations of men and women who may decide to pursue nursing careers. The right mix of recruitment strategies—implemented both by academic institutions and healthcare organizations—can ensure that minorities see nursing as a viable career option. Technology can enhance and streamline those strategies, as well as provide tools to measure their ultimate effectiveness.

**REFERENCES**
