Improving staff recruitment and retention in emergency departments – case studies

Maximising the potential of annual hours contracts in emergency departments

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

This case study follows the experience of Ben, an emergency department (ED) charge nurse with a passion for exploring and the outdoors.

What was the problem?

Ben was asked by a GP friend in 2001 to help care for a film crew of 120 people shooting on location in Iceland, Greenland and the Arctic. The trip would be six weeks long, which forced Ben to take unpaid leave, during which he worked for the company that was running the expedition. On returning to the UK, Ben restarted his old job as an ED nurse. Another opportunity arose the next year with the same company, shooting on location in Iceland. Again, Ben had to request unpaid leave.

Opportunities such as these were offered to Ben more and more frequently – he was a highly competent nurse with a passion for the outdoors and extreme climates, and he was equipped with the skills and knowledge to nurse in these conditions. Because of this, he was asked to come back frequently and had to continue requesting unpaid leave. Eventually, his acting matron at the time had to ask him to stop, as this routine had become disruptive and complicated.

Other staff who wanted to take extra leave to fulfil lifetime ambitions and spend time nursing in remote or extreme environments were being denied. This led to staff resigning, then reapplying for their old jobs, leading to a huge waste of human resources time and money in advertising jobs, interviewing and inducting staff.
What was the solution?

During this time, the trust reviewed its staff retention strategy and saw an opportunity for ED staff like Ben. The matron asked him if he would like to explore an ‘Improving working lives’ contract, developed by the trust.

This involved working 48 weeks a year instead of 52; he would work 37.5 hours a week but be paid for 34.5 hours: each week he would accrue time in lieu, which he could take in a four-week block when he went on his next expedition.

So during Ben’s trip, he was being paid by the trust and when he returned he did not have to reapply for his old job, saving him and the trust time and money.

What were the challenges?

The trust emphasised that this ‘extra’ leave could not be taken during the school summer holidays or Christmas holidays. It had to be taken to nurse internationally, rather than as extra family holiday. Ben emphasised the importance of his positive relationship with his department leaders in supporting him to achieve his aspirations, and would like to acknowledge the support he received from the nurse director, nurse consultant and other colleagues that made it possible.

What were the results?

Since this new contract, Ben has nursed all over the world. In 2004 he travelled to Antarctica and returned once a year from 2005-07 and in 2011 and 2012. In other years, he travelled north to arctic Norway to teach on a polar medicine course. He also taught in Slovenia.

A colleague offered the same contract travelled to Antarctica, was a medic on a trip to the summit of Kilimanjaro and worked in Norway and Slovenia.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-44075826
Results for the trust included:
- reduced sickness absence
- increased positivity and wellbeing for staff involved
- recognition for the trust and its ED, including articles in *Emergency Nurse* and lectures at conferences. It now hosts contributing authors of papers on treating frostbite. Finally, the trust (and Ben) were featured in a BBC article for International Nurses Day 2018.

What were the learning points?

Ben’s experience shows how working with your staff to give them opportunities to fulfil their aspirations can benefit your ED. As a leader in his department, Ben identified these benefits of an annualised hours contract:

- more motivated staff
- reduced sickness absence
- returning staff bringing new and varied experience to the hospital and inspiring their colleagues
- improved recruitment – staff are more likely to join if they can see they will be valued, listened to and have such enriching experiences
- improved retention – of staff who want to stay in their job but do not want to sacrifice other interests; they know the trust will keep their job for them, removing the stress of reapplying for a post they held six weeks earlier.

Senior leaders’ commitment and engagement is key – Ben was only able to take these opportunities because of a good understanding between him and his leaders, who were willing to support him.

Next steps and sustainability

Currently an advanced clinical practitioner in the department is working in the Philippines on location for an American television programme for the second year running. On return they will switch to an annual hours contract. This is part of an effort to expand the offer to more staff.
Want to know more?

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To see the other case studies in this series: visit the NHS Improvement website at: https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/improving-staff-retention/