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## Nurses Retention Strategies : Lessons from Covid-19 Pandemic

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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### Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare workers especially nurses were struggling day and night to provide care to the needy. This unexpected situation has increased the workload on nurses and their demand has increased worldwide. In addition to this, the rising number of emergency cases and the uncertainty regarding vaccine imposed a psychological disturbance on nurses. The pandemic amplified the issues like job stress, workload, burnout, and nurse's turnover which was there even before the pandemic. Increasing opportunities overseas attract many nurses to migrate to other countries. The pandemic is not over yet so it is vital for nations to strengthen their healthcare sector by filling the staff shortage. The hospitals should adopt proper retention strategies to retain their valuable employees. This study aims at examining various strategies adopted by private hospitals to retain their nurses during the pandemic.

### Keywords

**Pandemic, Staff burnout, Turnover, Retention strategies.**

### Introduction

The coronavirus emergency has caused many challenges around the globe for all the sectors. This sudden pandemic has created several challenges for the entire health care system in the world. Worldwide, the main attention was on the development of a new vaccine and on the strategies which the health care system would adopt to combat outbreak of Covid-19. The pandemic completely shifted the healthcare paradox and forced the hospital employees ie. doctors, nurses, paramedical staffs and other workers to become the frontline warriors. The pandemic has greatly affected the employees in the healthcare sector physically and psychologically, many of these employees have reported their fear of getting the disease or transmitting the virus to a loved one. In a hospital, nurses are the largest group and they have to care the patients for a long time. Lack of essential resources and inadequate protective equipment to deal with corona patients and absence of a proper covid treatment protocol increased the

nurse's chance to get easily infected. The hospital workers were taking huge risks irrespective of their lives, psychological wellbeing, family and relationships. They also experienced social avoidance, quarantines, work stress, attacks, increased living expenses and work-life imbalance.

The changing pandemic situation forced hospitals to upgrade their infrastructure facilities and to take measures to ensure disaster preparedness to face the pandemic situation in the future. This created many job openings to healthcare employees across the world. The wealthy nations like Canada, United States and United Kingdom etc. started largely recruiting medical field workers and professionals from the underdeveloped and developing countries to replenish their health care work force which was awfully affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The urgent recruitments and a strong pull from these wealthy nations has increased the migration pattern. The pandemic enters third year and new variant like omicron has strongly hit the nations and now the shortage of healthcare employees is a serious concern for the nations. In case if a serious crisis occurs in future, the country should be well equipped both in terms of infrastructure and human resource. So, the employers must take necessary measures to retain the nurses because without sufficient health workforce no country could fight against a pandemic or a major crisis.

### **Objective of the study**

To examine various strategies adopted by hospitals to retain nurses during Covid-19

### **Methodology**

This study is purely based on secondary data and for that journal, articles, reports of various financial institutions and websites have been used. The study is descriptive in nature.

### **Employee Retention Strategies**

Employee retention is considered as the heart of organizational success. It is defined as a process in which the employees are encouraged to remain with the organization for the maximum period of time or until the completion of the objectives (Singh & Dixit, 2011). The basic aim of employee retention strategies and practices is twofold within the organizations. One is to reduce employee turnover and, second, to considerably reduce the associated expenses of hiring and training and orientation of the new employees (Iqbal & Hashmi, 2015).

### **Strategies to Retain Nurses**

There is no single formula or strategy to manage retention crisis of nurses. Various innovative strategies that developed during the corona crisis are mentioned below:

#### **1. Develop leaders through Coaching and Mentoring Programs**

After the Covid-19 pandemic the main importance should be given to identify talented nurse leaders and take various measures to support them. Developing talented leaders and nurses with proper leadership quality will motivate others in their teams. Place them as reliable mentors who can provide proper guidance to others for reducing burnout.

#### **2. Flexible resource pools**

It is a pool of employees managed flexibly and proactively to make the most efficient use of an organisation's workforce. Large hospitals should consider implementing enterprise-wide resource pools in order to support their different units. During unexpected and emergency situations this method can be used as it is more strategic and easily adaptable.

#### **3. Clinical rotation opportunities**

Opportunity for monthly rotation must be provided. Rotation facility for administrative nurses provide them insight into the difficulties faced by other staff nurses.

4. **Proper succession plan**  
The existing leaders should have proper early succession plans by identifying talented and valuable candidates. And the leaders should give them coaching and mentoring. A succession plan should consist of spotting those individuals who have aim to become leaders and those with adequate skills and education.
5. **Provide proper training options**  
The covid emergency situation has forced many nurses to takeover various roles outside those for which they were trained or prepared for years. Nurses should be trained to deal with pandemic situations and for specialized roles.
6. **Psychological support**  
Nurses who deal with corona patients experience psychological trauma. Nurse's post- traumatic stress disorder existed even before the onset of Covid-19. They feel negative thoughts, hypervigilance, brain fog, sleep disturbances and flashbacks. The pandemic increased their work load and they felt insecure, loneliness and dissatisfied with the job. When a nurse quit job or tests covid positive his/her duty is being transferred to another one which in turn double others work load. So, the employers must provide proper measures to support their nurses like counselling, stress relief sessions, activities etc. It is significant for the hospitals to ensure that their organisation is sufficiently supporting and is giving due importance on the mental health of their employees.
7. **Stay and exit interviews**  
It is important for hospitals to know the real reason behind nurse's turnover. An exit interview helps the organisation to identify why an employee is leaving the organisation whereas stay interview depicts the reasons for an employee to stay with the organisation. Both these interviews help to uncover deeper problems faced by the employees with work environment or management. If those problems are properly addressed it will influence existing nurse's intention to stay. It also gives an opportunity for the management to frame proper retention strategies for their employees.
8. **Paid time off**  
The pandemic increased nurse's workload and many of them worked extra shifts as others were infected. During this time their work-life balance was as usual and no extra measures were taken to improve their work life balance. Long hours duty in personal protective equipment and caring for infected patients affected their physical and mental wellbeing. Work-life balance is important for emotional well-being, and a wellness culture supports time-off. Nurse's wellbeing is very important and hospitals should ensure their well-being by offering meals at reduced price, transportation, stress management programmes, e-coaching etc.
9. **Compensation**  
The pandemic increased nurse's workload and in order to retain them the hospitals increased their salary and offered bonus. As the crisis surged, compensation strategy was effective and helped in moving nurses to other of the nation with increased covid cases and staffing needs. The temporary duty with higher pay was accepted by those nurses who are willing to travel farther from home.
10. **Virtual Nursing**  
Technology platforms and camera can be used to connect the head nurse with their team and patients. The nurse can remotely watch their patients and give necessary instructions to bedside nurse regarding the care which don't need their physical intervention. The head nurse can communicate with the patient virtually by appearing on the monitor in the patient's room. This

may delay the retirement of senior nurses by providing them an environment that takes advantage of their clinical expertise while reducing the physical demands of the bedside.

#### 11. **Using experienced nurses**

During crisis the service of retired or ready to retire nurses can be used. These nurses work during shifts in a role that mainly use their valuable nursing knowledge. But their physical requirements are limited and they can concentrate on patient experience, guiding and mentoring patient care quality etc.

#### 12. **Tapping medical educators and students**

During the crisis many nursing schools offered their faculty and student's services to the hospitals. Their team volunteered in shifts and helped in various medical processes which are labour intensive. During the pandemic students from medical, pharmacy and nursing were helping hospitals by doing everything for the patients. The volunteering helps the hospital staffs to make their work life a little easier.

### **Conclusion**

The crisis has increased the demand for nurses all around the world and this will further ramp up demand over the next few years. The countries should concentrate on improving the supply of nurses in order to meet the changing and growing nurses demand which was created by Covid-19. Majority of the developing and underdeveloped countries faced pandemic with inadequate supply of nursing staffs. There is strong evidence of fast and massive nurses' recruitment by developed countries from other countries. This may affect the source countries in facing pandemic challenges in future. Therefore, hospital management must provide proper working conditions and should initiate policies to improve the working environments, pay and career opportunities. The above-mentioned strategies are beneficial in retaining nurses. There are traditional strategies to retain the staff but during and after an unprecedented situation it is better to incorporate innovative strategies with traditional strategies. The staff turnover shows the failure of implemented strategies so it is better to adopt new strategies to retain the nursing workforce. The proper adoption of the above-mentioned strategies will help hospitals to retain their nursing workforce. The Covid-19 pandemic affects the healthcare employee retention and which in turn will affect the survival of hospitals. So, it is very important for hospitals to have proper retention strategies then only they can survive in a highly competitive world.

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