



# Thought Leader Forum



## Summary of Findings Workforce Issues in Health Care

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AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR HEALTHCARE  
HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION  
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**F**ounded in 1964, ASHHRA is the leading voice for HR professionals in health care - linking people and organizations to leadership practices, best practices to patient outcomes, and outcomes to business results. Headquartered in Chicago, IL, the society has more than 3,400 members and services the needs of over 50 chapters throughout the United States. For more information about ASHHRA, visit [www.ashhra.org](http://www.ashhra.org).

### Vision

By joining together, by raising our skills and by speaking with one voice, we, as ASHHRA members will enhance the well-being of our employees, our health care organizations, and the communities we serve.

- ◆ **Our purpose:** To establish the expertise of health care HR through our ability to learn and share knowledge, build relationships, and exemplify excellence.
- ◆ **Our power:** To influence and impact the future of the health care workforce and those they serve.
- ◆ **Our promise:** To keep in our minds and hearts the passion and commitment we have for our profession.

### Mission

ASHHRA leads the way for members to become more effective, valued, and credible leaders in health care human resources administration.

### Guiding Principles

Collaboration \* Service Excellence  
Integrity \* Innovation \* Passion

### Value Proposition

We offer high quality and effective resources, educational programs, and networking opportunities to human resources professionals in the health care industry.

# Introduction

The American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration (ASHHRA), a personal membership group of the American Hospital Association (AHA), held its second Thought Leader Forum on Saturday, October 11, 2008 in Austin, Texas, prior to the ASHHRA 2008 Annual Conference.

Molly S. Seals, Sr. Vice President of HR & Learning, Catholic Health Partners Northeast Division/Humility of Mary Health Partners, and ASHHRA immediate past president, chaired the proceedings. The discussion was moderated by Larry Walker, president of The Walker Company Healthcare Consulting.

A select group of health care human resources experts participated in the Forum, a two-hour session titled, "Workforce Issues in Health Care." The CEOs in particular noted that human resources leaders in health care play a pivotal role in creating a culture of quality and patient safety.

"The forum provided an outstanding opportunity for health care leaders to identify today's major workforce challenges and the many ways HR professionals should lead efforts and initiatives to address those," said ASHHRA president Jeanene Martin. "The information provided in this summary will be beneficial to all health care leaders; it takes all of us to plan for and ensure a productive workforce."

The Thought Leader Forum *Summary of Findings* is a strategic overview of workforce issues found in health care. Related resources from the Thought Leader Forum, such as the Forum *Discussion Transcript*, can be found at [www.ASHHRA.org](http://www.ASHHRA.org).

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# Summary of Findings

Challenges, opportunities and barriers related to strengthening health care workforce excellence were the focus of a Thought Leader Forum on “Workforce Issues in Health Care.” A panel of 11 participants focused on labor shortages, recruitment, retention, engagement, and change in today’s health care environment. Discussion among the HR leaders was passionate and productive. Best practices, lessons learned, and innovative and transformational ideas, workforce and workplace improvement ideas were shared during an energetic and fast-paced discussion that focused in the following areas:

- Preparing for increasing labor shortages
- Recruiting to meet current and future workforce needs
- Retaining current employees
- Focusing on and fostering employee engagement
- Increasing diversity and inclusion
- Aligning the HR function with strategic direction
- Facilitating a culture that supports change
- Developing leaders and creating succession planning strategies.

## Preparing for Increasing Labor Shortages

Current and projected labor shortages are a key concern for health care HR executives. Workforce shortages are projected to increase for at least the next 20 years. The thought leaders agreed that the worst of the shortages have yet to be experienced. The challenge is to build the business case for investment today to deal with a shortage whose major impact will be experienced in the future.

As the gap in labor supply and demand widens it is imperative that HR professionals establish effective strategies to recruit and retain employees.

## Recruiting to Meet Current and Future Workforce Needs

Selecting the right employees is the first step toward building an effective, sustainable workforce. Health care is a physically and mentally demanding field, and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to find people willing to work in a 24/7/365 environment. Workforce recruitment in today’s market requires creative recruitment strategies and close collaboration and partnerships with others.

Thought leaders discussed successes they have had partnering with local schools, colleges, and universities to provide health care and mentoring programs for students. These partnerships have been an effective way to fill the workforce pipeline, while also providing career opportunities to students in local communities. Targeting second career individuals with work experience in other fields was also cited as an effective recruitment strategy. In the current economic climate, health care is becoming an increasingly attractive option for people who are looking for a new career that offers good compensation, benefits, and stability.

Panel members also discussed the importance for recruiting a diverse workforce and selecting individuals with a wide range of ideas, backgrounds, and experiences. The health care field has historically done a good job of recruiting from within, which is an effective way to maintain and spread “tribal knowledge.” At the same time, it is important to balance internal succession by bringing in candidates from the outside that bring different perspectives and best practices.

## Retaining Current Employees

Labor shortages must also be combated by focusing on retaining current employees. Retaining the aging workforce is of particular importance. Younger employees have an increased focus on work/life balance and are choosing to limit the number of hours they are willing to work. The thought leaders agreed that HR executives will need to work organization-wide to redesign work environments to keep employees working in the hospital as long as possible, as well as redesign the way care is delivered to ensure that it’s provided safely.

Employee retention is improved by creating a culture that focuses on employee engagement, empowerment, diversity and inclusion.

## Focusing and Fostering Employee Engagement

Creating a culture that encourages employee engagement was a topic discussed at length by the thought leaders. In addition to increasing retention, high levels of engagement and empowerment have a positive effect on patient safety and satisfaction.

Employee engagement has also been correlated with improved financial performance and reduced overtime. HR leaders should build the case as to why engagement is critical

## Thought Leader Forum

for organizational success and how it connects to financial outcomes, including the savings that organizations will see in increased retention and the cost-per-hire for replacement. The benefits of investing more in people should be connected with potential improvements to the bottom line.

Engagement may be fostered by appealing to the needs and expectations of each individual and tying all work to the organization's mission. People seek out health care careers because they have a passion for taking care of people. Describing how employees' work helps deliver on important strategies of quality and patient safety will increase employee commitment to the organization.

The thought leaders concurred that a heightened focus should be placed on the people aspect of HR, and an environment should be created where employees are empowered, satisfied, trusted, and feel valued. The environment and treatment the organization and leadership provide to employees will directly impact the level of service provided to patients.

### Increasing Diversity and Inclusion

A diverse and inclusive workforce holds several benefits for hospitals and health systems, including increased engagement, trust, and recruitment advantages. A diverse workforce can also create challenges for HR professionals. Language barriers among employees and between employees and patients may negatively impact communication effectiveness. Cultural competence is a top concern for HR leaders because it impacts team building, functioning, and communication.

There is greater generational diversity in the health care field than ever before, and the younger workforce differs significantly from its older counterparts. People enter the field for different reasons than they did even a decade ago. This makes ensuring employee engagement more challenging, as more flexibility and creativity is needed to accommodate the varying needs and expectations of an increasingly diverse workforce. The younger generation of health care workers is not as focused on climbing a career ladder, and is more practical in its approach to work. To earn extra income, for example, the younger workforce may be more likely to pick up a float shift at a different hospital rather than seek a promotion that comes with an added workload and more job pressure.

### Aligning the HR Function with Strategic Direction

Thought leaders explored the challenges of ensuring that human resources is not viewed as "just a department." All hospital managers and executives must be adept at human resources leadership. Recruitment and retention strategies

and recognition programs support organizational effectiveness and success. Focusing on the human side of the business is good for employees, good for patients, and good for the business.

Creating a healthier workforce is a major challenge, and a great opportunity for HR leaders to play a role in improving the financial strength of an organization. Thought leaders have found success through offering a variety of incentives to employees when they complete health assessments, and commit in other ways to keeping themselves healthy and ready to meet patient needs.

### Facilitating a Culture that Supports Change

Thought leaders agreed that improving the workplace will require continual attention to building the hospital culture. Change is not always readily or warmly welcomed by employees, and therefore it is important for leaders to help staff members embrace, implement, and promote each change initiative.

Leaders can help create a culture that supports change by encouraging, nurturing and reinforcing innovative and creative thinking, treating mistakes as learning opportunities, and providing recognition and rewards for innovative thinking and actions.

### Developing Leaders and Creating Succession Planning Strategies

Thought leaders discussed the importance of ensuring that frontline leaders have the strength, competence, support, and capability to succeed in their jobs. Frontline leaders often have spans of control that are too wide, and work under unrealistic expectations. Creating leadership development centers, leadership assessment centers, and mentorship programs will help set leaders up for success, improve their effectiveness, and reduce burnout. Leadership development reduces turnover and increases patient satisfaction, which helps further support the business case for investing in leadership development at all levels of the organization.

Well-developed succession planning and leadership continuity programs are critical functions for HR leaders. An environment should also be developed where creativity and out-of-the-box thinking are supported.

### Skills HR Leaders Must Develop to Become True Strategic Leaders in Their Organizations

- Being transparent, particularly during adverse times, creates an environment of trust, confidence, and loyalty. Knowledge and understanding will help inform what needs to be done to accomplish the organization's goals.

- HR executives must understand the business and industry, patient expectations, and what the community expects.
- Build relationships, share expertise about the people side of the business, and focus on strengthening employee engagement and empowerment.
- Build the business case that investing resources in the people side of the business positively impacts patients, the community, and the bottom line.
- Employees cannot be expected to be engaged unless they know that leadership is engaged with them. Show engagement through good communication, being visible in the organization, job shadowing, and being engaged in the community.
- Incorporate structures and tools that enable change and help develop other change agents throughout the organization.
- Admit mistakes, be open about not always having the answer, and be willing to respond to tough questions.
- Be involved with employees, the organization, and the community. Small gestures go a long way.
- Be a role model; set an example for others to follow.
- Be adaptable and flexible. One size leadership does not fit all.
- Be a translator. Know how to translate the business objectives and the strategic plan of the organization to every employee so there is a clear understanding of responsibility, and so people can see how they make a difference.
- Be knowledgeable about the new workforce; they have different expectations and motivators, they don't simply respect management because of a title. Respect must be earned.

### **Advice for Other HR Leaders in Health Care**

Improving the health care workforce does not always require an abundance of resources. Engagement, transparency, and visibility are free. Thought leaders recommended that organizations understand what engagement means from a team and individual perspective, and encourage team discussions around engagement. Team leaders should explore what it takes to increase a sense of loyalty and commitment for the organization, how employees like to be recognized, and communication preferences.

In addition, HR leaders should identify the vital few goals and objectives executive management are focused on, and align HR strategy to contribute to their success. This will increase human resources' relevance to and strategic integration in the business.

Several no- or low-cost professional organizations provide valuable information and resources that HR leaders can utilize to build professionalism. Lastly, HR leaders should be involved with their local colleges and universities to help grow the next generation of health care workers.

### **Conclusion**

HR leaders are in a unique position to impact the success of hospitals and health systems in meaningful, lasting ways.

Labor shortages, a changing workforce, and economic pressures will create a number of challenges for HR executives in the years ahead. Focusing on employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, leadership development, and aligning with the business strategy will have a positive effect on workforce health, patient care and satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness and profitability.

## Thought Leader Forum Participants



**Laura J. Easton**  
*CEO*  
Caldwell Memorial  
Hospital, Lenoir, N.C.



**Kathleen Harris**  
*VP, HR and Organizational  
Development*  
Mercy Health System  
Janesville, Wis.



**Fred Hobby**  
*President & CEO*  
Institute for Diversity  
American Hospital  
Association  
Chicago, Ill.



**Jeanene Martin**  
*Sr. VP, Human Resources*  
WakeMed Health and  
Hospitals  
Raleigh, N.C.



**Brandon Melton**  
*Sr. VP, Human Resources*  
Lifespan Health System  
Providence, R.I.



**Amy Schultz**  
*Director, Organizational  
and HR Development*  
Henry Ford Health System  
Detroit, Mich.



**Molly Seals**  
*Sr. Vice-President, HR &  
Learning*  
Catholic Health Partners  
NE Division, Humility of  
Mary Health Partners  
Youngstown, Ohio



**Deb Stock**  
*VP, Member Relations*  
American Hospital  
Association  
Chicago, Ill.



**Greg Terrell**  
*Sr. Director, Patient Safety*  
Tenet Healthcare  
Dallas, Texas



**Amy Wilson-Stronks**  
*Project Director, Division  
of Standards and Survey  
Methods*  
The Joint Commission  
Oakbrook Terrace, Ill.



**Dan Zuhlke**  
*VP, Human Resources*  
Intermountain Health Care  
Salt Lake City, Utah

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# Thought Leader Action Ideas

## *for Maximizing the Role of Health Care Human Resources in Responding to Workforce Issues in Health Care*

### Labor Shortages/Recruitment/Retention

- Work with local schools, colleges, and universities to develop health care programs to fill the workforce pipeline. Develop creative “grow your own” recruitment strategies.
- Develop creative workforce recruitment efforts that will reach out to and attract more men and minorities.
- Explore creative ways to restructure jobs and workplace structures to be an “employer of choice” that attracts workers and increases retention.
- Develop a clear business case for investing in employee development today to ensure that the organization is well-prepared to succeed despite increased workforce shortages in the upcoming years.
- Explore and adopt innovative ways to redesign care processes to retain older employees.
- Capitalize on the current economic downturn by promoting the stability, growth and opportunity of health care careers.

### Employee Engagement and Empowerment

- Work to understand what “engagement” means to employees - how they want to be communicated with, involved and recognized.
- Build a business case for the role of employee engagement in creating improved organizational performance and financial success.
- Create an inclusive, empowering environment of trust and respect that builds a sense of employee ownership in the organization’s direction and success.
- Focus more resources on the people aspects of HR in addition to the HR functional aspects.
- Encourage and support an expectation and appreciation for out-of-the-box thinking, and reinforce innovation and creativity.
- Align employee commitment to and engagement in achieving the organization’s most critical organizational objectives.
- Empower and encourage employees to speak up and positively confront issues affecting organizational performance.

### Developing Employee Performance and Commitment

- Invest in leadership development and mentoring programs to increase the effectiveness of current leaders and groom future leaders.

- Communicate the organization’s business objectives in ways that enable all employees to understand, embrace and contribute to their achievement.
- Devise strategies to understand and appeal to the career needs and expectations of each individual employee.
- Assist managers and executives to understand the new expectations and motivators of a changing workforce, and their relationship to management style and substance.
- Develop internal “knowledge capital” through succession planning and talent management at every level in the organization.

### Align the Role of HR with Business Development

- Tie human resources work to organizational outcomes and business effectiveness.
- Create incentive programs that increase employees’ participation in health and wellness programs that improve employee health and reduce costs.
- Build the business case that investing resources in the people side of the business positively impacts patients and the community.

### HR Leadership

- Advocate for a human resources’ seat at the “strategy table.”
- Deeply embed the HR function in all aspects of organizational thinking and planning.
- Demonstrate the connection between the investment in human resources and the positive impacts on quality, patient satisfaction, community trust and business growth.
- Help build greater organizational learning and transparency through deep and wide-ranging communication.
- Nurture and develop “change agents” throughout the organization who continually challenge the status quo and stimulate new organizational thinking.
- Build an organization-wide understanding of business and industry trends, patient and community expectations, and ways HR can best contribute to organizational improvement.



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For more information about Quick Leonard Kieffer, contact:

Roger Quick  
Quick Leonard Kieffer International  
555 West Jackson Boulevard, 2nd Floor  
Chicago, IL 60661  
(312) 876-9800 p  
(312) 876-9264 f  
rquick@qlksearch.com



qlksearch.com



One North Franklin  
Chicago, IL 60606  
Phone: 312.422.3720  
Fax: 312.422.4577  
Email: ashhra@aha.org  
www.ashhra.org