

Staff Optimization – A Prescription for Superior Patient Outcomes

In today's health care environment, labor expense typically exceeds 50 percent of a healthcare system's annual budget. Having the tools to accurately analyze staffing levels and staffing ratios is key to extending access to more patients and achieving Triple Aim: better care, lower cost, and improved health.

Human resources are the most important component of the health care delivery infrastructure and successful attainment of the Triple Aim. While the U.S. healthcare workforce is well-educated and well-trained, there is relatively little attention paid to workforce strategy and, up until the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was ratified, few policy incentives existed to initiate the desired changes. Resources are not always deployed in ways conducive to establishing patient-oriented health care delivery systems. Effective staff optimization through workforce management is the key to achieving and maintaining the objectives of the Triple Aim.

Gone are the standard eight hour day shifts. We need to be creative in how we schedule our employees

Workforce Management has become a common term in the contact center industry; but how many healthcare systems actually have the resources in place to effectively implement and sustain such a powerful tool? In today's post Affordable Care Act environment, it is more critical to manage patient expectations regarding their quality of care and overall satisfaction, while continuing to be fiscally responsible to the organization. This starts when the patient initiates the first point of contact, whether it is by phone, email, chat, social media or self-service interactions. An effective workforce management solution can aid in accomplishing the objectives of the Triple Aim and ultimately create better patient outcomes.

Time for a Change



According to Ventana Research, "many organizations still use personal productivity tools such as spreadsheets" for their workforce management needs. They found that of the organizations polled, "92 percent of organizations use them universally, yet almost half of the organizations (42%) find the use of the spreadsheets makes it difficult

to manage a workforce." Although there are numerous reasons for implementing a workforce management solution, the majority of organizations polled (including health systems), found the most important factor is the demand for higher staff productivity.

Simply put, workforce management tools optimize staffing resources using predictive analysis and models. Healthcare systems can support workforce requirements across multiple sites, ensuring the right number of dedicated resource is available at the right time, across the continuum of care. The predictive staffing model is based on historical call volume and takes into account patient scenarios such as seasonality (back to school appointment scheduling), call fluctuations by day and also by time of day (Monday mornings). In a patient scheduling environment, call volume consists of peaks and valleys that can decrease staff productivity, impacting the satisfaction and quality of patient care, as patient calls may not be responded to in an appropriate amount of time. It is imperative that your staff is assigned based on **patient need**, not merely by a random straight shift schedule. Gone are the standard eight hour day shifts. Health systems need to be creative in how staff is scheduled whether it is part-time, split shifts, or ten hour days at a physical location or remotely from a home office. Patients receive better care because the right employee is available at the right time to respond. Clinicians save money by more efficiently managing idle human resources. Triple Aim objectives quickly become easier to manage.

Increased Staff Satisfaction

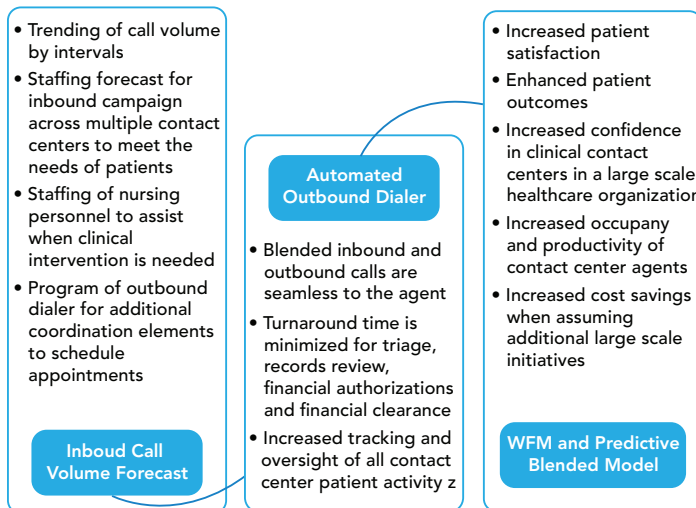
In addition to increased productivity, there are many other benefits of workforce management solutions. While healthcare systems need a productive workforce, they also need to focus on the satisfaction of staff as well as patients.

Customized outbound messaging can transform a contact center into a patient centric service unit with the capability to aid in the coordination of care, scheduling and revenue cycle functions, usually at a fraction of a face to face interaction.

Better interaction management

When patients call their healthcare system, they want answers, not hold time. Staff managing these calls can get overwhelmed quickly, leading to frustration and attrition. Workforce management solutions can help by assessing the intensity of appointment request calls through 15 minute intervals. It can in turn, program outbound calls during the call volume valleys to patients waiting for an appointment post triage, a second message to patients requiring record review and finally a third to insurance payers calling for financial clearance and authorization on a patient's procedure.

The illustration below shows the interaction between inbound call forecasting, automated outbound dialer messaging and the results in a blended model.



Training

What is one of the most prevalent complaints from employees? Insufficient training... For as much as we attempt to have a highly trained workforce, there never seems to be enough time to successfully accomplish this task. A workforce management system can recognize lulls in call volumes and "push" on-line training modules to employees. An adequately trained workforce will lead to an increased level of patient care while reducing attrition expenses.

Vacation Requests

Time off can be requested directly through the workforce management system, rather than to the supervisor/manager. Based on the call volume projection and time off already scheduled,

employees will automatically be notified if their request has been approved. Override requests may be submitted to the manager if not approved. Again, a properly staffed environment increases employee and patient satisfaction and reduces costs.

Work At Home

Let's face it. Today's workforce is more mobile and expects a flexible work environment to fit their lifestyles. Workforce management solutions are designed today to allow for full operational functionality from a remote environment, creating work at home teams. Works from home environments allow healthcare systems to implement various schedules, such as split-shifts. Due to call volume, an employee may work 7:00 am to 11:00, sign off and work another shift in the evening hours. Employees feel empowered to take control back of their schedules and are able to find a better work-life balance. Patients interact with satisfied employees, creating a better overall experience and reduced bottom line costs resulting in staff attrition.

Effective Workforce Management

To manage to the objectives of the Triple Aim, an effective workforce management team must be in place. This team is responsible for analyzing the predictive modeling results and making adjustments in the system due to unforeseen staff needs such as unscheduled time off and weather implications. Listed below are the key job functions of the workforce management team.

Forecaster/Scheduler

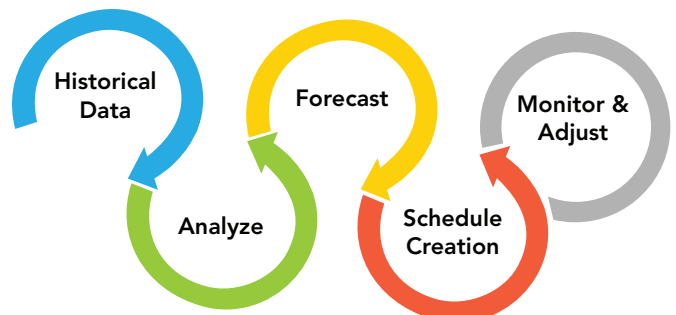
Forecasters/schedulers are responsible for workforce optimization based on historical call volume. They are also responsible for the provision of staff schedules to call center management on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. A successful forecaster will develop a staffing analysis that ranges from 93-100% in its accuracy on a consistent basis. The analyst will utilize past trends and assist in forecasting future staffing needs.

Real-Time Analysts

Real time analysts are responsible for making real-time adjustments to schedule based on unforeseen fluctuations in call volume. The real time analyst must be involved in all operational meetings to understand the needs of the patients, physicians, clinicians and the culture of the contact center. The analyst must have the analytical capability to assess the impact of daily fluctuations in call volumes.

Once the team is in place, their focus is creating a workforce management process, which consists of five simple steps:

Workforce Management Process



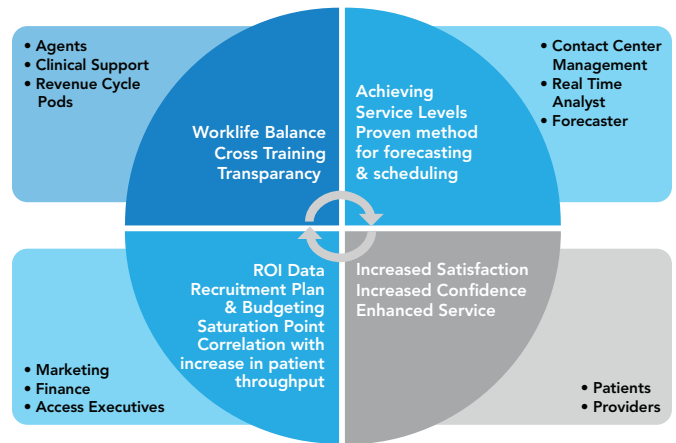
The forecaster/scheduler and real-time analysts perform these functions on a daily basis to ensure optimal scheduling. Following these five simple steps will bring closer alignment to the goals of the Triple Aim through a more productive staff, lower costs, and increase employee and patient satisfaction.

Strategic Use of Workforce Management

Once the team is in place, healthcare systems will quickly start to see the strategic benefits in the ability to track increased patient volumes and throughput. In addition, marketing teams can also use this process to track the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Workforce management solutions enable the marketing teams to track market penetration and messaging effectiveness. In turn, an increase in patient visits can be attributed to specific marketing campaigns and a return on investment can be derived.

Similar tools can be used to develop a request for non-budgeted staffing needs. Workforce management allows operations analysts and executives to examine pre-existing volumes to develop an advanced forecast, by patient population, in areas where little data exists. These forecasts can be linked to an increase in volumes, gross revenue and most importantly patient satisfaction due to enhanced service levels. Workforce management is a key success factor within world class healthcare contact centers. It has a range of functions that can benefit the staff, contact center management, marketing, corporate finance and patient access executives. Its benefits not only enhance the culture and operations of internal customers but create a superior patient experience that long-term will increase the patient base through word of mouth and social media posts. The objectives of the Triple Aim are met.

Workforce management solutions have far reaching benefits outside of the contact center -



In Summary

When evaluating the objectives of the Triple Aim, workforce management is a key success factor. The contact center in many cases is the patient's first point of contact whether they are sick and need rapid attention, have a billing question or simply need to schedule a wellness appointment. This interaction whether through a phone call, social media or self-service channels sets the tone for the remainder of the individual's encounter. Done well, the patient will feel taken care of and have a positive experience. Using workforce management can improve interactions between providers and patients – creating a meaningful impact on all three goals of the Triple Aim.

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