Managing people

What ORs find is working to keep veteran periop staff over age 50

A variety of shifts, flexible benefits, ergonomic aid, and building bridges between generations are strategies ORs are using to retain senior staff in hospitals recognized by AARP as the Best Employers for Workers Over 50.

Hospitals made up more than half of the top 15 employers on AARP’s 2007 list. The best employers are selected based on their recruitment, workplace culture, flexible schedules, life-long learning, benefits, and opportunities for retirees. OR Manager interviewed perioperative nursing leaders at 5 of the top hospitals to see what is working for them.

Nurse researchers have also studied what bonds senior nurses to their organizations. A survey of over 1,000 RNs by Cleveland Clinic researchers found 12 items lead the list for keeping nurses over age 56 (sidebar).

Still going strong

Some of the 5 hospitals have staff who are still working after age 70.

“We have a woman who is 72 and still going strong in our CS department. She is one of our best workers,” says Kathy Santini, RN, BS, MBA, vice president for surgical services for Richmond, Virginia-based Bon Secours Health System.

Lisa Morrissey, RN, MBA, CNOR, nursing director of the main ORs at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), Boston, says the main ORs have a vacancy rate of only about 1% for its 290 FTEs.

“We have a very senior staff. We also continue to receive candidates for our positions, both with experience and without,” Morrissey says.

At Morristown Memorial Hospital, Morristown, New Jersey, part of Atlantic Health, retention in the OR is high, and staff generally leave only if a spouse is transferred or a similar reason, says Michelle Burke, RN, MSA, CNOR, who was manager of surgical services at Morristown until recently. She is now director of perioperative services at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

These are retention strategies the perioperative leaders are using.

‘Every shift you can think of’

OR directors have known for years that flexibility is a key, not only for covering cases but also for staff satisfaction.

“I’ve got every shift you can think of—12-hour, 10-hour, 8-hour and 4-hour shifts, and we have lunch shifts,” says Bernadette McDonald, RN, BSN, CNOR, administrative director of perioperative services at Leesburg Regional Medical Center in Leesburg, Florida.

One creative twist is a summers-off program where staff can work 4 12-hour days from September to May; take off June, July, and August; and receive a pay check year around.

Bon Secours has “working-mothers hours.” “They get the kids on the bus, come in to help with coffee and lunch relief, and are home to pick up the kids from the bus,” Santini says.

Excused from call?

Call is a fact of life in the OR, but once staff get to a certain age, they may want to surrender the beeper. Three of the 5 hospitals excuse senior OR staff from at least some call.
Morristown changed its policy recently to allow OR staff who have been with the hospital for 20 years or more not to take call, provided coverage is adequate. “Coverage wasn’t an issue because we had staff who gobble up call,” Burke says. Leesburg does not excuse senior staff because “probably 70% of my staff would be excluded from call,” McDonald says. “The good part is they are able to give up their call because others will take it.” She has nurses working full time who are over 70—and taking call.

MGH halves the call requirement for staff with 25 or more years’ seniority. The regular requirement is about 1 call shift a month because the hospital is staffed 24/7, and staff can trade their call.

Bon Secours takes a case-by-case approach. “If we have a person who comes to us and says, ‘I’m 62, and I’d like to cut back on call,’ we look at that and talk to the nursing staff,” Santini notes. “We basically have not turned anybody down.”

At MidMichigan Medical Center in Midland, staff no longer have to take call if they are 55 or older, though that might change in the future depending on staffing needs, notes Cindy Fredrich, RN, BS, CNOR, manager of the OR, patient transport, and sterile processing.

Extra pay for off-shifts has helped fill some vacancies recently. Staff can earn also an additional $2.40 an hour if they work an extended weekday shift from 11 am to 11 pm or $1.60 an hour for the 9 am to 9 pm shift. This is in addition to the usual shift differential. Incentive pay of $7.50 an hour is offered for those who pick up additional shifts outside of their regular schedule.

Range of benefits
Part-timers can qualify for full-time benefits with as few as 32 hours in a 2-week pay period at Bon Secours. They vest in the retirement program with 1,000 or more hours worked a year (0.5 FTE). For the other 4 hospitals, 45 to 72 hours per pay period qualifies staff for full benefits.

Tuition reimbursement is an important benefit for senior staff as well as younger ones.

“I have a lot of people in their 40s and even in the AARP age group who are in school right now,” says Santini. Bon Secours will pay for nurses to get their bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Bon Secours has education programs for nurses, surgical techs, and assistants.

Health and fitness are encouraged. Bon Secours will pick up half the cost of a 12-week Weight Watchers program and has other wellness opportunities.

Saving shoulders and backs
Surgical services, with its unwieldy equipment carts, heavy instrument sets, and bariatric patients, takes its toll on musculoskeletal systems.

Bon Secours and Morristown have had ergonomic experts conduct assessments in their departments and make recommendations. Like many, Bon Secours has reduced the weight of its instrument sets and added equipment to help in managing bariatric patients. Burke reports that Morristown’s administration has been “totally supportive” of requests to provide assistive equipment like sit stools and ergonomic computer workstations. A challenge still to be met—the heavy lead aprons the staff must wear during the many procedures that require imaging.

Providing assistants is another way to support the staff.

Leesburg calls its assistants OR facilitators. In addition to stocking supplies and pulling case carts, they help with positioning and holding of limbs. Those who are certified as nursing assistants II can qualify to open sterile supplies after taking a class and passing a set of competencies.

Morristown has added a nursing assistant III position. Assistants are assigned to a core of rooms to assist with turnover activities and hold limbs. MGH uses equipment and instrument techs for case picking, setting up OR table accessories, and moving equipment.

Building generational bridges
With a few staff over 70 and new ones in their 20s, managers can have 4 genera-
tions in a department. Bridging the age groups takes education, relationship building, and, equally important, a sense of humor. In-services, active mentoring, and surveys to monitor staff satisfaction are some approaches AARP’s top hospitals are taking.

Staff from various age groups mentor new employees in the Bon Secours system. “We may have a 52-year-old person going to a 32-year-old person and saying, ‘You’re my mentor,’ and vice versa,” Santini says.

At Leesburg, “We’ve had open discussion about our differences. Some of us have raised children from the younger generations,” McDonald says. “I find if you can get 5 years from a nurse right out of school, you’re lucky. They’re going to move and change. That’s just their culture.”

McDonald holds open discussions about age differences and how to resolve conflicts. She’s brought in the hospital’s HR experts to teach conflict resolution and communication skills. To make it fun, she’s used the Color Code (www.thecolorcode.com), a test that assigns colors to personality types. Red’s motive is power, blue’s is intimacy, white’s is peace, and yellow’s is fun.

“We make a game of it—These are my traits. What color am I?” she says. It gives people a chance to talk about their differences.

MGH is using the Crucial Conversations training from VitalSmarts (www.vitalsmarts.com), which helps the staff learn skills for communicating in high-stakes, high-stress situations. The skills can be applied in all kinds of situations, such as helping newer nurses address senior staff who aren’t sharing information, Morrissey notes.

It’s the culture

Beyond the shift options and good benefits lie the intangibles—what people call their culture. It’s what makes employees want to come to work. Managers’ enthusiasm is one of the elements.

McDonald, who’s been at Leesburg 18 years, says, “I like my job. Some days, I love my job.” Despite the constant challenges, she says, “I like the people I work with, I like the organization, and it’s a pleasure to come to work.”

Santini attributes Bon Secours’s culture to its mission as a not-for-profit Catholic organization.

“They have other opportunities in our community,” she says. “But I think you can feel that we really live our mission. You really feel like you’re serving, and you’re working with great people.”

To stay in tune with their employees, the hospitals take their pulse in satisfaction surveys.

Bon Secours uses Gallup’s employee engagement program (www.gallup.com/consulting), which uses 12 research-based questions, such as, “I have the materials and equipment I need to do my job right,” and “My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.” Departments build action plans around the results.

Bon Secours is also about to embark on Ritz Carlton’s employee empowerment program (http://corporate.ritzcarlton.com/en/LeadershipCenter/), which teaches skills employees need to make decisions that improve service to patients, families, and colleagues.

At Morristown and MGH, which both have Magnet recognition for nursing excellence, staff have opportunities to make a difference professionally.

Managers at Morristown work with the shared governance councils on areas to improve and report back monthly to the staff. “The staff feel they have input,” which has shown up in results of the employee engagement survey, notes Burke.

Morrissey says staff at MGH can join in a variety of collaborative practice and performance improvement projects. They might, for example, help define best practice for a patient population or help plan implementation of a new program, such as percutaneous valve replacement.

As these top employers have found, the AARP age group is a key resource that is willing to stay engaged with a few adjustments and targeted benefits.
References


**AARP Best Employers, 2007**

The top 15 (hospitals and health systems in bold):

1. SC Johnson, Racine, Wisconsin
2. **Mercy Health System, Janesville, Wisconsin**
3. First Horizon National Corp, Memphis
4. **Scripps Health, San Diego**
5. Stanley Consultants, Muscatine, Iowa
6. **Lee Memorial Health System, Fort Myers, Florida**
7. Leesburg Regional Medical Center & The Villages Regional Hospital, Leesburg, Florida
8. George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia
9. Principal Financial Group, Boston
10. **Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston**
11. MidMichigan Health, Midland, Michigan
12. **Bon Secours Richmond Health System, Richmond, Virginia**
13. YMCA of Greater Rochester, Rochester, New York
14. Brevard Public Schools, Viera, Florida
15. **Atlantic Health, Morristown, New Jersey**

*M Magnet recognition for nursing excellence. Note: Scripps Health La Jolla has magnet status. In Atlantic Health, Morristown Memorial Hospital has Magnet status.

**Top 12 satisfiers for RNs over 56**

Items important to staff RNs over age 56 in a survey by the Cleveland Clinic:

1. Coworker support
2. Teamwork
3. Retirement benefits
4. Adequate equipment
5. Health care benefits
6. Open-door policy
7. Respect from physicians
8. Job security
9. Shift of choice
10. Paid-time-off per year
11. Respect from administration
12. Educational opportunities