RETENTION BEST PRACTICES

IU Health Reduces Medical Assistant Turnover by 85 Percent with Career Ladder Program and NHA Certification

Indiana University Health (IU Health) employs nearly 40,000 people, including approximately 1,500 medical assistants that support patient care across IU Health hospitals, urgent care facilities, and physician offices. When high medical assistant turnover caused operational and financial problems, IU Health designed a medical assistant career ladder program featuring new pay tiers, creative benefits, and NHA's Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) certification. Patients now receive better care, medical assistants have a clearer career path, and turnover has gone from 75 percent to just 12 percent.

Brandi Burgin is clear about the value and the role that medical assistants play in delivering patient care at Indiana University Health: great medical assistants are crucial to improving patient comfort, physician productivity, and the cost of care.

"We couldn't run our hospitals and practices without our medical assistants," Burgin said. "They're involved in so many patient-facing activities including greeting, scheduling, charting, and generally helping patients feel relaxed, and staff stay organized."

As an Organizational Learning and Talent Development Consultant at IU Health, an integrated academic health center headquartered in Indianapolis, Burgin has created a career ladder program that not only attracts the best medical assistants but also gives them the financial, social, and educational support they need to build long-term careers with IU Health.

Higher than average pay is what naturally attracts new medical assistant candidates, but it's the extra benefits that often drive retention, such as well-defined career pathways, childcare, and transportation benefits, and the job-enhancing advantages of obtaining the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) certification from National Healthcareer Association (NHA.)

"We've taken a holistic approach, and NHA has been an incredible collaborator with us on this program every step of the way," Burgin said. "They're accountable, adaptable, and most importantly – successful – in terms of helping us train and certify talented medical assistants that care, do great work, and want to stay with us for the long term."

Workforce Investments Born of Necessity

Before the medical assisting career ladder program was developed, turnover rates for medical assistants at IU Health were in the 75th percentile. Open positions ballooned, and talent acquisition efforts couldn't keep up.

In addition to the stress of being short-staffed, the hard-dollar cost of medical assistant turnover was also taking a toll financially. Turnover costs add up quickly when you consider overtime worked by existing medical assistants, administrator salaries and benefits, and the amount of administrator time spent in new hiring and training.

In fact, according to a recent paper on the financial cost of medical assistant turnover in the Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine, the average cost of turnover per medical assistant was estimated at $14,200, or about 40 percent of the average annual salary of a medical assistant. Burgin and her colleagues knew that medical assistants needed and deserved a more structured and appealing career ladder that allowed them the opportunity for career growth and continued professional success.



"Our partnership with NHA has been very productive. Our doctors and nurses love the high-quality support, our medical assistants have new opportunities for financial and professional advancement, and our patients receive higher-quality care. The investment is easy to understand, easy to justify, and an easy one to make."

Brandi Burgin, Organizational Learning and Talent Development Consultant
IU Health

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Retention Best Practices: IU Health Medical Assistant Career Ladder and NHA Partnership Demonstrate Amazing ROI

Ambition: IU Health needed to stem high medical assistant turnover, and overhaul its career ladder program to improve participation, engagement, and overall retention.

Action: IU Health added new employment benefits for childcare and transportation, as well as embedding the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) certification from NHA, along with program cohorts, to improve accountability and certification completions.

Outcomes: IU Health has lowered its medical assistant turnover rate to just 12 percent, reduced open positions by 50 percent, and maintained a 98 percent first-time pass rate on CCMA certification exams.

"We looked at everything during our process, including pay rates, benefits, homelife needs, professional needs, and really wanted to develop a program for the whole person," Burgin said. "NHA listened and met us where we were, sharing valuable insights and even suggesting a revised cohort model to help encourage certification registration and completion."

Career Ladder and Certification Cohorts Drive Results

With several years of the medical assistant career ladder and NHA's CCMA certification in place, Burgin says the numbers are compelling.

"Our turnover is down to just around 12 percent annually, open medical assistant positions have been reduced by 50 percent, and our NHA certification exams continue to see 98 percent passing rates on the first attempt," Burgin said.

Certification cohorts have helped promote the CCMA certification. The cohorts promote community, collegiality, and healthy competition. IU Health also allows up to three hours of study time per week and encourages its licensed staff of doctors, nurses, and pharmacists to provide mentorship and support as needed.

Burgin and her team have also partnered with Junior Achievement and the Indianapolis Public Schools on a new program that makes the NHA Patient Care Technician (CPCT/A) certification program available at the high school level. Students that earn the credential can join IU Health part-time during high school, or while they attend college, and then join full-time upon graduation or move on to other healthcare careers.

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