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Management: Up with People

Written by Matt Bolch
Tuesday, 01 September 2009

Tears flow with regularity every eight months when WellStar graduates another class of School at Work (SAW) students. Believe everyone should have an opportunity to learn and grow, said Helen Slaven, chief learning officer for the five-hospital employee system just northwest of Atlanta.

"It was unexpected, but SAW students tend to be older and they'd be going back to school," Slaven said. "They're never and often study with their grandkids."

SAW, developed by Catalyst Learning Co., focuses on work development for entry-level healthcare workers. The system retention and prepares graduates for promotion or for further education, said Lynn Fischer, founder and CEO of Louisville, Ky.-based Catalyst Learning.

The SAW product is being used at 400 hospitals in 40 states. Data show that graduates are 8% to 23% more likely to remain with one-third enrolling in a continuing education opportunity of graduation.

"Although the return on investment is quantifiable, equally important as quantifiable is the impact on employee engagement," said Fischer. SAW helps a hospital become an employer of choice, giving entry-level healthcare workers a chance to grow and develop in their jobs. The impact on morale is very important.

SAW was not initially developed for the healthcare industry, but Fischer was looking to adapt the program to industries motivated to develop entry-level workers when American Hospital Association released "In Our Hands: How Hospital Leaders Can Build A Thriving Workforce" in April 2002. The report described the impending shortage of healthcare workers, prompting hospital executives to examine staffing issues at all levels.

"There are so many job opportunities at hospitals for people who don't necessarily have associate's degrees, much less bachelor's degrees," Fischer said. "With one year of SAW and one year in a certificate-level program, a worker can almost double his or her salary."

Beyond entry level

Catalyst Learning has developed two additional programs for the healthcare arena to help hospitals retain and create more promotable employees. The first is ECHO: Expanding your Career and Healthcare Opportunities. This five-month course is aimed at employees who already possess strong reading, math, and computer skills and hold such titles as sterile processing tech, supervisor, and lead secretary.

ECHO covers topics like medical terminology, anatomy, physiology, and medical ethics. With the help of Catalyst Learning's Career and Learning Plan, students identify goals and create career plans. Outstanding students are paired with a coach, and students are encouraged to identify career advisers and mentors who can help guide future career decisions.

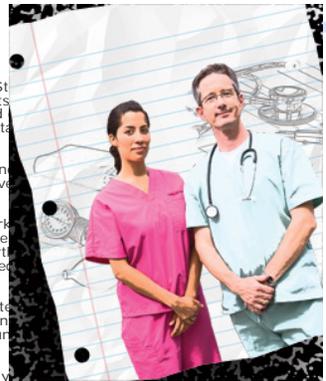
More than half of supervisors report increased productivity from Catalyst grads, and 90% of graduates feel their employer provides opportunities to improve knowledge and skills. A survey showed that 20% of graduates received a job promotion within one year, and 46% gained more responsibility in their current positions.

The newest Catalyst Learning offering is CareerCare, a Web-based tool for career planning in the healthcare industry. This self-paced program allows participants to assess their personal interests and background while discovering and researching jobs within their organization without the need for one-on-one advising. CareerCare can help users understand their interests and aptitudes, learn the requirements for a variety of hospital jobs, identify a path to a new position, prepare for continuing education, and gain enthusiasm and commitment to the organization.

"CareerCare allows hospitals to grow their employees in a cost-effective way," Fischer said. "Many hospitals offer tuition reimbursement, and this is an insurance policy to give employees the impetus to pursue careers that match their interests."

Building a lower rung

Before joining WellStar, Slaven worked at Baptist Health South Florida, where she brought SAW initially. "We had tuition reimbursement for a nurse scholarship program, but the lower rung of the career ladder was missing,"



employees help each other as much as leaders do, which builds a safe environment where they're not afraid of failing."

The WellStar program recently graduated its third class of 50 to 60 students, each of who are generally in their 30s, 40s, or 50s and are paid for time spent in the classroom. She has seen students return to school after decades away from the classroom and watched them get promoted. Classes are taught by WellStar employees who volunteer for the task. "SAW coaches receive so much more than they give employees," Slaven said. "High-performing employees see this as a way to give back."

In response to feedback, WellStar has added basic adult education classes like GED completion and other remedial courses. The system is looking to expand learning with both ECHO and CareerCare, which Slaven sees as logical extensions to the core SAW program.

"The goal is to provide people with opportunities to learn and grow at work," Slaven said. "We can't forget that there is talent at all levels of the organization. A secondary goal is to leverage that talent at all levels of the organization as we face worker shortages in the healthcare industry now and in the future."

Slaven noted the hospital system has a robust tuition reimbursement program that covers the gamut of healthcare careers.

Fischer believes that the Catalyst Learning offerings deepen the breadth of programs that hospitals usually offer. "Progressive hospitals see potential in every employee," Fischer said. "SAW helps develop a group of employees that have historically been overlooked."

Matt Bolch, mbolch@mindspring.com, is a freelance writer based in Atlanta.

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