

The diminishing skills pool: facing the challenge

From pipe extrusion to food processing, from mining to metal casting, businesses in South Africa are having to adapt to a troubling trend, as the lure of lucrative alternatives in other countries takes its toll: the rapidly shrinking pool of qualified occupational health professionals. As usual, though, South Africans are showing remarkable ingenuity and flexibility in facing this challenge, devising and employing strategies which are actually turning this seemingly irreversible brain drain to their advantage.

At first glance, it would seem that the talent and skills we do have are being spread pretty thin but, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that what is emerging is a more effective deployment model. For example:

- administrative personnel are being brought into bigger clinics to allow occupational health professionals to do more of the work that requires their special skills;
- the responsibility of managing clinics and maintaining staff complements is often being outsourced to external individuals and organizations better able to execute the function;
- occupational health professionals are frequently servicing more than one clinic, dividing their time between a number of clients; and
- software administrative tools, such as ClinicSister are more commonly deployed.

Occuwel, an outsource clinic management organization established in KwaZulu-Natal, is a case in point. With a number of clients under her control, Dr Wendy Lewis, the CEO of Occuwel, has implemented ClinicSister as a software solution to ensure that the wellbeing of her clients' workforce is maintained whilst, at the same time, providing senior management within the client organizations with up-to-date, relevant statistical and management reports.

"There's a constant danger that one loses one's qualified nursing staff so the administrative personnel become the hardcore of the clinic, giving the client continuity," points out Dr Lewis, "And ClinicSister gives us the stable and reliable informatics we need to provide the client with the decision-making tools they need."

Dr Lewis added that her major client had found the absenteeism reporting invaluable but, for Occuwel, the other advantages of ClinicSister were far more relevant: "The drug control is excellent and a huge time saver for us, whilst the medical and surveillance management of ClinicSister has been a big help in utilizing our time more effectively."

In her drive to cope with the demands of the modern

South African occupational health clinic, Dr Lewis puts the strength of ClinicSister down to its ease-of-use and speed-of-entry, citing, as testimony, the fact that one person can enter 600 sick-notes in two days, despite having to decipher the sick-notes before entering them.

"As an additional tool, the developer from Bloodhound Projects created an export facility which gives us a comprehensive statistical picture in Excel which we are able to analyse to meet new demands from our client," Lewis states, adding that: "The goodwill generated with the client by the output from ClinicSister has made for a good working relationship."

It seems though that ClinicSister is also making its mark in other parts of South Africa:

Dr Fred McCreedy, an independent occupational health practitioner in Gauteng, travels hundreds of kilometres each week attending to the needs of his clients' workers and, deploying ClinicSister at each clinic, he has mastered the art of optimizing his time and that of the sisters in the clinics he is responsible for.

"As an occupational health practitioner, you have to be ahead of the game and the most important thing I've found over time is that, with ClinicSister, we can extract information as and when we or our client need it," Dr McCreedy explained.

With his clients spread out over a large area, Dr McCreedy puts great store in the robustness of the software, pointing out that: "Apart from being user-friendly, it just doesn't crash."

But dealing with different clients has its challenges and Dr McCreedy enthused about the support he has received: "The backup is superb! Bloodhound Projects has been more than willing to tweak ClinicSister so that it is ahead of my needs."

It is evident that optimizing resources in a multi-pronged approach is the solution most people have adopted to meet the challenge of a diminishing pool of professionals and the success of the strategy is clearly evident. Certainly, obstacles exist, particularly where a business is reluctant to invest in the tools needed to assist their occupational health professionals. Dr McCreedy explains: "One can never predict the demands of management and, in clinics where one extracts data manually, it takes ages to produce the required reporting."

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