



Ailing nurse roster systems add \$\$\$ to cost of nursing

Outmoded practices in labour management and nurse rostering are having a significant impact on the cost and quality of healthcare, according to a study of Australian private and not-for-profit healthcare providers, designed to better understand the issues that hospitals face in balancing patient care, labour expenses and profitability..

As hospitals and aged care facilities struggle to contain escalating labour costs while managing the complex demands of providing the right number and mix of skills and experience to meet anticipated patient demand, their task is further complicated by the increasing need to supplement the inadequate pool of permanent full-time nursing staff, often at short notice, with more expensive agency staff.

However, despite the complexities involved in healthcare rostering with its diverse array of specialisations and awards, the research found that over three quarters (77 per cent) of the organisations surveyed still use manual rostering systems that are time-consuming, unreliable and prone to error. Of those manual systems, 75 percent were Excel or Lotus spreadsheets, while the rest were completely paper based.

These very systems are adding to the strain under which nursing staff are required to operate, according to the survey of 131 of the largest private and not-for-profit healthcare facilities in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

Conducted by ACA Research on behalf of Kronos Australia Pty Ltd, the study found that senior nursing staff, such as Directors of Nursing and Nursing Unit Managers, were the main people managing the manual rostering systems, while automated systems were typically managed by Rostering Managers, freeing up DONs and NUMS for other duties.

The study also found:

48 per cent spend four or more hours a week preparing the nursing roster;

44 per cent spend a further four hours or more amending it to accommodate changes in availability;

60 per cent felt rostering took up too much of their time;

61 per cent said they struggled to cope with constant changes to the roster caused by nurses calling in sick.

Respondents also highlighted problems such as the lack of available staff, unnecessary use of expensive agency nurses and that fact that nurses are often double-booked or get paid incorrectly, further contributing to low morale.

Another common complaint (55 per cent) was that the use of manual systems typically spreadsheet-based tools demanded significant involvement from senior nursing staff, diverting them from other, more productive and highly skilled duties.

The financial impact of relying on agency nurses was revealed as a bigger issue for organisations using manual systems since they displayed less flexibility than those with automated solutions.

The Report of the 2002 Senate Committee Inquiry into Nursing included extensive evidence on this issue, revealing that hospitals were paying up to \$265 per hour for agency staff. It also highlighted the stress involved for employed nurses, who had to orientate those people, get them up to speed and supervise them. This happens quite a bit and is a significant stressor, the report said.

Peter Harte, managing director, Kronos Australia Pty Ltd, said those healthcare facilities which employed automated rostering and labour analytics systems were reaping the benefits of substantial time savings, improved accuracy, higher staff morale and reduced wastage.

In today's highly competitive marketplace, healthcare providers face the difficult challenge of balancing high levels of patient care with the need to reduce labour costs by optimising the use of in-house staff, he said.

Automated rostering and labour management systems not only help to minimise costs by reducing overtime and the use of agency workers, but they improve employee retention by increasing staff satisfaction and provide real-time access to labour and budgetary information.

A leader provider of employee-centric applications to more than 4,000 healthcare organisations around the world, Kronos helps healthcare facilities to address their staffing challenges through its automated, enterprise-wide staff scheduling solution.

About Kronos

Kronos' best-in-class Employee Relationship Management solution enables organisations to reduce costs and increase productivity, improve employee satisfaction, align employee performance with organisational objectives, and put real-time information in the hands of decision makers. More than 40,000 organisations worldwide trust Kronos to solve their employee-centric business challenges.

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