



Overcoming Hiring Conundrums: Hunting Unicorns or Chasing Cats

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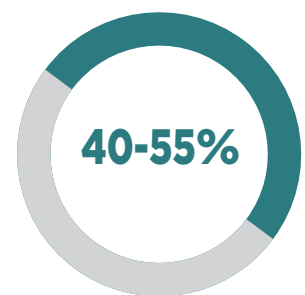
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Today's Healthcare Personnel Challenges

By now, the headline *“America is Experiencing a Healthcare Workforce Crisis”* is unlikely to surprise anyone. We’ve all heard it time and time again: A large portion of our healthcare workforce is nearing retirement age, our general population is aging and will prompt an increased need for geriatric care, and the retention rates for most nurses or client-facing support professionals is abysmal. A logical question from any healthcare professional looking at this picture is, *“How do I mitigate or get control of this changing landscape within my organization?”*

The workforce crisis is a very real phenomenon backed by some worrying statistics, and the

issues are projected to only worsen throughout the next decade. For example, studies and surveys from the past five years indicated that between 40 to 55 percent of the Registered Nursing (RN) workforce is 50 years or older, with projections that 1 million RNs will retire in the next 10 to 15 years (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2017). Couple this with the fact that almost 18 percent of



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new RNs turnover within their first year (Kovner, Brewer, Fatehi, & Jun, 2014) and the numbers paint a worrying picture of sustainability. Other healthcare professions are not better off, either; for example, Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) have an average turnover rate of between 40 to 50 percent (American Network of Community Options and Resources [ANCOR], 2014). In 2012, the Center for American Progress (CAP) found that, on average, it costs 21.4 percent of an employee's salary to replace them in the event of turnover. That amounts to \$6,420 for an employee making \$30,000 annually (someone like a DSP), and \$14,552 for an employee making \$68,000 annually, such as an RN. Examine these costs in context of the high turnover rates, and it's easy to see how much of a powerful impact turnover has on your organization's bottom line.



There are many important factors that contribute to the turnover of healthcare staff: insufficient staffing, lack of experience, patient demographics, and inconsistencies in salaries. Individually and combined, these issues frequently lead to staff burnout and lack of engagement, which contributes to a vicious cycle of workforce turnover (Cox, Willis, & Coustasse, 2014). The issue does not stop there, however. Compound the high turnover rates observed among these important healthcare occupations with the fact that these same groups are projected to grow over the next decade between 15.3 and 23.6 percent (with

specific professions projected to grow anywhere from 36 to 47 percent) (US Department of Labor [DOL], 2018), and healthcare professionals across the country can begin to see the scale and scope of the issues we'll be facing over the next couple of decades.



That's All a Bit Worrisome... How Can I Get in Front of These Trends?

Organizations across the continuum of care are inevitably looking for solutions to identify the risk of employee burnout and turnover, find and retain those who have the requisite knowledge and skills to be successful in their role, and creatively implement solutions that will not only address the problem, but maintain sustainability in the turbulent years ahead, where demographics will further squeeze the availability of competent healthcare professionals.

The good news is, if you're reading or searching for information such as this, you're already concerned about investing in your human capital. And from here on out, in order to mitigate or even reverse these trends for your organization, that's exactly how you need

to be thinking about your workforce: your employees, personnel, staff, and so on are your human capital—the value represented by their collective knowledge, skills, and abilities—which can be invested in and developed for significant returns. There are myriad ways to invest in your human capital, but no single point is likely to provide your organization with a greater return on investment than selecting the right employee for the right job and ensuring they have the right competencies, knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics to be successful in that job. Yes, that’s right—investment in your human capital starts during the hiring process, which is long before a potential employee even steps foot in your proverbial door!

One versatile solution that healthcare organizations can leverage to significantly improve their hiring and selection process is personnel assessments. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines a personnel assessment as “any method of collecting information on individuals for the purpose of making a selection decision... [which] include, but are not limited to, hiring, placement, promotion, referral, retention, and entry into programs leading to advancement” (OPM, n.d., para. 3). Let’s explore how using assessments—either one or multiple in combination—has the potential to improve your organization’s selection process in greater detail.

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Yes, Give Me an Assessments Breakdown! What Do They Mean to Me?

As professionals, we are the sum of multiple parts. This means that it is not only job knowledge, also known as “hard skills,” that contributes to successful job performance. Personality characteristics, tendencies,

preferences, communication style, personal experience, individual perceptions, and the like, all contribute to the formula that makes each person a unique individual. The Institute of Medicine (2011) supports this notion, explaining that nurses in particular, need to possess acumen in knowing how to work in teams, effectively collaborate with

others, navigate ethical dilemmas frequently encountered in the workplace, function as a patient advocate, and understand the foundations for quality improvement. Assessing these many facets of a person is considered the holistic model of assessment and where the true value of assessment becomes apparent to those making hiring decisions.

Now that you’re aware that success in any given job is contingent upon multiple factors, a logical question is, “How do I even begin to measure and understand these many different facets of a person?” Doing so is often accomplished by employing one or more of nine different types of assessments commonly used for personnel selection (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology [SIOP], n.d.):

ASSESSMENT

1. **Assessment centers:** *Typically done in person at an on-site location, assessment centers use a combination of exercises that are similar to experiences encountered on the job to assess interpersonal, communication, analytical, and planning/organization skills.*
2. **Biographical data (biodata):** *Self-report questionnaires that can assess a number of areas, but attempt to predict the likelihood of being successful on a job by asking questions related to job-specific knowledge and skills, education, training, work experience, and interests.*
3. **Cognitive ability:** *Assesses an applicant's ability to learn quickly, their logic, reasoning and reading comprehension, and other enduring mental abilities.*
4. **Integrity:** *Assesses an applicant's attitudes and experiences as they relate to honesty, dependability, trustworthiness, reliability, and pro-social behavior.*
5. **Interviews:** *A staple of most selection processes, interviews are usually conducted in-person, virtually, or over the phone. What an interview assesses will vary by organization and interviewer but will generally include questions related to interpersonal, communication, and teamwork skills, as well as job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities. Structured interviews, where a standardized set of questions are asked to each applicant, promote consistency in the evaluation of applicants.*
6. **Job knowledge:** *Assesses job-specific, technical or professional expertise and knowledge.*
7. **Personality:** *Clinicians will report key measures of patient engagement and information exchange. Clinicians can choose which performance measures matter most to them on which to be rewarded.*
8. **Physical ability:** *Assesses job-related, physical attributes and capabilities.*
9. **Work samples and simulations:** *Often rolled into the types of tasks used in assessment centers, these assessments ask applicants to perform work that is similar to what the applicant would be doing on the job.*

If you find that traditional selection methods have not improved employee retention at your organization, increased your employee engagement, or improved your outcomes, you may want to consider introducing assessments into the pre-hire period of your employee selection process. Additionally, if continuity in your hiring process has room for improvement, such as ensuring all candidates are equally evaluated for a specific job on the same set knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics, introducing assessments will likely be one of your most meaningful first steps. In the current model of building high reliability organizations, Ciprano (2008) stated, “creating *high reliability* means simplifying and standardizing processes as well as building in levels of redundancy in personnel and safety measures.”

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OK, but How Do Assessments Help Me Hire Better?

In one study conducted to examine the financial impact of using selection assessments to reduce turnover in nurses, it was estimated that an average size medical center would see around \$10 million in savings across six years by using a holistic assessment approach in the pre-hire selection stage (Ostmann, Biddle, Patchell, and Gonzalez, n.d.). In another study of a large regional health system over two years, using selection assessments as a pre-hire tool to help choose the



best nurses in their applicant pool resulted in an 81 percent reduction of turnover (Relias, 2015). How, then, can you take the first step toward achieving similar results? Let's take a look at the typical selection process, where assessments are most often used for two occasions:

1. Prior to the first interview taking place.

At this point, assessments are used as a screening tool to ensure that only applicants who possess the minimum necessary job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities, are qualified to move forward to the interview process. Deploying assessments at this stage is especially helpful to whittle down a large pool of applicants in order to get to a handful of highly qualified, potential interviewees.

2. Prior to the final interview and selection

decision. If deployed toward the end of the selection process, assessments are used to offer an in-depth look into the competencies, knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics of the few remaining finalists. Assessing candidates at this stage usually involves administering multiple assessments and examining job-related factors that go beyond basic competency, such as personality,

behavior, and traits that could contribute to success or failure.

How do you ensure that an assessment is applicable to the role for which you are hiring? One of the first steps is to confirm that important knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics of the role are accurately being assessed by your choice of assessment(s).

When using assessments at either stage of your selection process, applicability of the assessments will be one of your first key considerations. How do you ensure that an assessment is applicable to the role for which you are hiring? One of the first steps is to confirm that important knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics of the role are accurately being assessed by your choice of assessment(s).

Assessments can be hyper-focused and measure only a single piece of knowledge, skill, ability, or characteristic; or, an assessment can be broad in scope and measure multiple facets of a specific job. Examples of the former include a knowledge assessment for an RN that measures the ability of performing dosage calculations

or a personality assessment that measures empathy. An example of the latter would entail an assessment for Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) in long-term care that measures knowledge across seven job-related areas: basic nursing knowledge, infection control skills, legal and ethical knowledge, physical care skills, restorative skills, and psychosocial and communicative skills. Another example for, say, a phlebotomist, would entail choosing an assessment that measures any applicant's knowledge of anatomy and physiology, laboratory tubes, proper venipuncture technique, infection control measures, and standard precautions, to name a few.



aspects you may wish to know about a potential candidate.

For this reason, multiple assessments are usually given to an applicant, either simultaneously, or as it becomes important to know more about an applicant as they move through the hiring process. This can include one or more knowledge tests, a behavioral or personality test, and a test on situational judgment. Using multiple assessments can provide you with a holistic picture of your candidates and allow you to make more meaningful judgments based on how successful they may be in a particular job.

Once you know the knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics you want to measure for a specific job, you should be aware of two important considerations in order to get the best results from using assessments during your selection process:

1. A single assessment is unlikely to provide all the information you need to understand a candidate from a whole-person perspective.

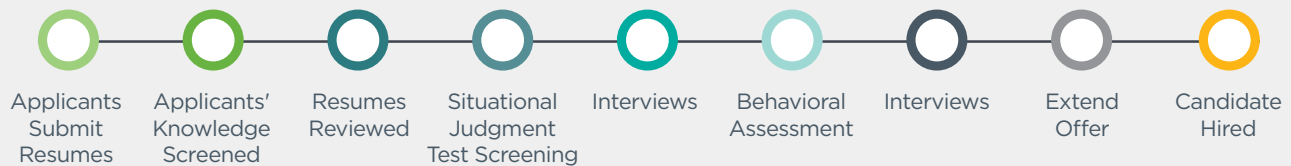
It is unlikely that a single assessment will be able to tell you if a candidate possesses all the knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics to be successful on the job, provide you with a comprehensive picture of the candidate's personality traits and how those traits could impact their work, and give insight into the candidate's attitudes, integrity, potential derailing behaviors, and other important

2. Assessment results—regardless of the number of assessments used—should never be the sole decision-making criteria used at the final selection decision to hire a specific candidate.

Assessment results for each of your finalists should be taken in consideration with all of your other existing hiring tools, such as resume reviews, interviews, reference and background checks, and so forth. Furthermore, if you're willing to share and discuss portions of a candidate's results with them during their interviews, you will give them an opportunity to explain what the results mean to them, see how they interpret them in relation to their behavior, and gain valuable insight into the thought processes behind how the candidate arrived at their answers to some of the questions on the assessments.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE OF ALL THESE CONCEPTS IN ACTION:

You have 20 people apply for a position at your organization. So as not to waste time and resources interviewing all 20, you first screen your applicant pool using a knowledge assessment to establish that all applicants possess the baseline knowledge necessary to succeed in the position. Next, after reviewing resumes but prior to offering interviews, you further screen the remaining candidates using a situational judgment test to understand how they might interact with others in potentially ambiguous or difficult situations. At this point, you conduct your first round of interviews and decide who will progress to the final interviews. Then, prior to the final interviews, you ask the remaining candidates to complete a behavioral assessment to learn more about each of their personalities and behavioral traits. The results will help you probe into areas of potential concern, and surmise how well they might fit into the role and your organization. You then extend an offer to your top choice based on a combination of your resume reviews, assessment results, and interviews.



Assessments Sound Powerful! Are There Legal and Ethical Ramifications in Their Use?

As an organization, how and when you introduce assessments into your selection process, as well as which types of assessments you use, will largely depend on your unique needs. However, there are a few general guidelines and considerations you must be aware of when assessments are used for hiring and selection, regardless of the type used or when assessments are introduced into your process:

An assessment must be accurate and consistent in relation to its measurements of or toward a specific target population.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 1978) requires via its *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures* that any selection assessment demonstrate evidence that it accurately

measures what it claims to (also known as validity), as well as produces consistent results (also known as reliability), among those who take it for its intended purpose.

Let's expand a bit on the CNA example you just read about to help unpack this very important point. If your CNA selection assessment included questions surrounding infection control, then there must be evidence that supports the questions are actually measuring knowledge of infection control, and not, say, knowledge around restorative skills. This is one component of validation, and the evidence is usually provided through statistical analysis in conjunction with several other procedures, such as the use of subject matter experts. Additionally, the assessment must demonstrate that the same set of items regarding infection control would render the same results over a

period of time if taken by the same person. This is reliability, or consistency in results, and is also demonstrated via statistical analyses.

An assessment should be linked to competencies, knowledge, skills, abilities, and/or characteristics tied to a specific job, task, or responsibility.

If a knowledge, skill, ability, or characteristic is being measured by an assessment for selection decisions, there must be evidence supporting that the specific construct is important to the job. This is another component of validation. For example, if you were using an assessment to help select the best CNA out of a pool of applicants, it should **not** assess any knowledge, skills, abilities, or characteristics unrelated to their job. Put another way, you wouldn't assess a CNA on their knowledge of complications that could arise after surgery if their job does not depend upon possessing such knowledge as a functional requirement for success or safe patient care.

The assessment should not discriminate against members of any race, sex, or ethnic group unless the assessment has been validated and what it is measuring is considered to be a bona fide occupational qualification.

When an assessment unintentionally discriminates against a particular group of people based on factors unrelated to a specific job, task or responsibility, it is commonly referred to as *adverse impact*. As per the *Uniform Guidelines* (EEOC, 1978, §1607.3), even if an assessment has been validated, adverse impact should be minimized as much as possible, or if there are other validated



assessments available for the same purpose that demonstrate less adverse impact, those alternatives should be chosen.

Let's also unpack this further by continuing our CNA example. You've chosen a validated assessment that measures knowledge of infection control for CNAs. The assessment should provide evidence that the questions being asked do not cause a particular race, sex, or ethnic group to score disproportionately worse or better than another group. If you were choosing between two assessments, and *Assessment A* had evidence showing that men scored worse than women on the questions, whereas *Assessment B* had evidence showing that all groups scored the same, you should choose *Assessment B*, because it does not demonstrate adverse impact against men. Choosing an assessment that minimizes adverse impact gives you the confidence to say that, when you examine assessment results across multiple CNAs, you know that the differences in their scores are a result of their individual differences in knowledge and not due to an external, systemic factor.

But What if I Need Someone *RIGHT NOW*, or What if I've Already Hired Them?

One of the major concerns levied against using selection assessments is “choking” an organization’s hiring funnel, or otherwise reducing an already limited applicant pool. Questions such as, “*What if I only have one or two applicants apply for a position?*” and “*What if I need someone right now and can’t afford to be picky?*” are often warily asked, indicating a fear that introducing assessments would hinder an organization’s effort to find scarce yet critical personnel to fill long-open vacancies. However, because factors such as high turnover continue to plague healthcare positions, with 30 percent of healthcare employees likely to turnover within their first year of work (NSI Nursing Solutions, 2017), healthcare organizations understand that *something* must be done to ensure the quality of their hires and to retain their talent.

If you’re worried about choking an already anemic hiring funnel but still want to invest in your human capital to mitigate risk and reduce turnover, then you may want to consider using assessments at one of two points during or after the hiring process:

1. WHEN EXTENDING A JOB OFFER

If you absolutely must hire an individual without using assessments to inform the hiring decision itself, such as when you have single applicant apply or only a single applicant made it through your initial screening measures (e.g., resume screens, background checks, etc.), then you can

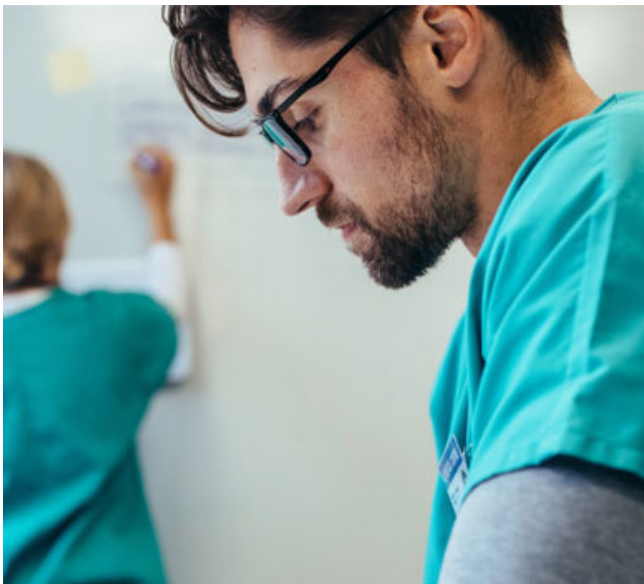
use assessments as an exploratory tool to help identify strengths, areas of improvement, and give insight into how the person may behave and interact with others, be best managed, or manage others. When using assessments in this capacity, they will not influence your hiring decision; rather, you administer them in conjunction with extending the job offer so that you can get a complete understanding of the new employee’s knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics, which can be passed along to their manager for use as a developmental aid during the new employee’s first year on the job. This information is especially valuable if your organization does not have a robust onboarding process for new employees, as it will allow you to craft an individualized development plan and make you aware of where the new employee may excel or have opportunities for improvement, allowing to you manage them more effectively.

2. AT THE BEGINNING OF THE ONBOARDING PROCESS

Even if your organization does have an onboarding process, it may not be as effective in preparing new employees for the job as you expect. A recent survey of 350 HR leaders found that onboarding programs fall short of effectively onboarding new hires at a staggering 76 percent of organizations (Maurer, 2018). Supporting this claim, exit survey data from a study examining annual hospital turnover showed that only 50 to 62 percent of new RNs believed that their onboarding process provided information they deemed necessary for

“What if I only have one or two applicants apply for a position?” and “What if I need someone right now and can’t afford to be picky?”

successful employment (Kurnat-Thoma, Ganger, Peterson, & Channell, 2017). Because onboarding programs often fall short of new employee expectations and do not adequately prepare them for success in their new role, assessments can be used to identify an employee's unique strengths and areas of improvement and then help you craft an individualized onboarding plan that involves training specific to their needs. And because the assessments you're using should be linked to the knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics indicative of success in that job, you and the new employee can be assured that the information they're receiving is necessary to their job function.



Using assessments in this capacity will likely result in differing onboarding times between each new employee, depending on their needs. If, for example, you're hiring a brand-new CNA who has little clinical knowledge, you may wish to provide a more in-depth review of these concepts during the onboarding phase. On the

other hand, if you're hiring an RN with years of experience and a solid grasp of the basic clinical knowledge required to perform their job, their onboarding time will likely decrease. Indeed, in one study of using assessments to individualize preceptor onboarding for ICU and Medical/Surgical RNs, onboarding time was decreased by 2.0 to 2.5 weeks, resulting in an estimated \$85,000 worth of savings across six months (Relias, 2016).

What About for Ongoing Development... Can I Use Assessments as a "Pulse Check"?

If you're reading this and thinking to yourself, *"I've already filled the positions I needed for now. Would assessments still benefit me?"* The answer is a resounding yes, and in this case, assessments would be used in an exploratory fashion as a developmental tool. For such developmental purposes, assessments help you better understand your current human capital by identifying areas of strength and areas of improvement, such as gaps in knowledge, that are important to the job role. Let's dive deeper into how this could benefit you and your organization through a practical example.

The professional practice of nursing continuously evolves for each practitioner. A new graduate from an academic nursing program is expected to possess and apply a body of knowledge to a variety of healthcare settings or specialties, such as medical-surgical, obstetrics, pediatrics, and psychiatry. The state licensure examination is an assessment to determine if the graduate possesses the knowledge of the aforementioned specialties. Once a nurse has received licensure, however, it is rare that they are employed in a position where all of this knowledge is required.

More commonly, a new graduate will be hired into one particular specialty, such as critical care or medical-surgical. While foundational knowledge about other specialties is helpful, competencies required at the time of licensure are rarely maintained throughout their career.

The professional nurse's career begins to take on a life of its own, whereby clinical acumen, experience, knowledge, and confidence in a particular care area are developed over many years. However, it is at this point in time, after several years of focused practice, that assessments can serve as a powerful tool in providing rich data about the staff member's current level of competency.



Using assessments in this capacity is not only efficient and a better steward of resources, but it can also promote nurse satisfaction by considering an alternative, unique method to professional education, as opposed to the traditional, cookie-cutter formula frequently seen in many healthcare organizations.

Assessments are constructive when results are communicated or displayed in a way that is meaningful. For example, critical care RNs are required to understand and interpret electrocardiogram (ECG) tracings. These tracings are the output when a patient wears a portable heart monitor, sometimes called a “telemetry monitor.” For accurate interpretation,

the RN must be competent in understanding the tracing's components, synthesizing the information to form an interpretation of the cardiac rhythm, and then applying those interpretations to various categories of cardiac arrhythmias. Each of these stages are highly

complex and requires knowledge of many different factors. Therefore, a pulse check of the RN's knowledge is advantageous for supporting the competency, education, and ultimately the safety of the people the RN is serving.

Assessments providing a level of detail demonstrating RN

competency in the various categories of arrhythmias can facilitate targeted education. If a RN demonstrates competency with junctional ECG tracings, but is deficient in competency with heart blocks, assessment results should clearly identify where gaps exist. This refined view changes the approach in educating the RN, focusing on areas in where they specifically need support. Using assessments in this capacity is not only efficient and a better steward of resources, but it can also promote nurse satisfaction by considering an alternative, unique method to professional education, as opposed to the traditional, cookie-cutter formula frequently seen in many healthcare organizations.



That's a Lot to Take in... What's the One Thing I Should Take Away?

Assessments, when used at the pre-hire stage of your selection process, are a powerful set of tools that can help you choose the best candidate for the job.

When used properly, assessments can:

- Ensure that an applicant possesses the minimum necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics to be successful in the job for which they are applying
- Provide you with insight into the applicant's behavioral and personality traits that could positively or negatively impact their job performance
- Legally protect your organization by standardizing your hiring process for a single position, whereby all applicants are measured against the same set of job-relevant criteria

However, because assessments can be so powerful when used to make selection decisions, some caution must be taken.

1. Assessments should be accurate and consistent in their results
2. Assessments should be job-relevant
3. Assessments should not unfairly discriminate against a particular group of people based on factors unrelated to the job for which they are applying

If you decide to deploy assessments to improve your hiring process, as long as you follow these best practices and use the assessments in conjunction with your other selection data to make a meaningful and informed hiring decision, then you, too, will be able to mitigate or get ahead of the current challenges facing the healthcare workforce, as well as those coming in the years ahead!

Your organization can utilize assessments to streamline hiring, onboarding and staff development.

LEARN MORE

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