

Recruiting Medical Laboratory Staff: An Educator's Point of View

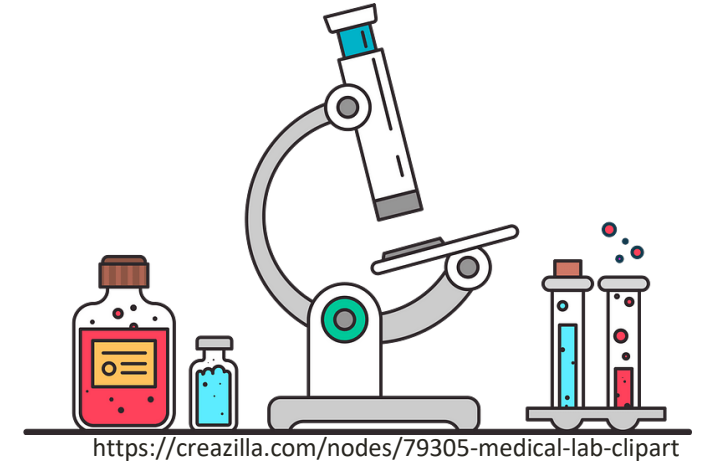
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Recruiting Medical Laboratory Staff: An Educator's Point of View

Objectives



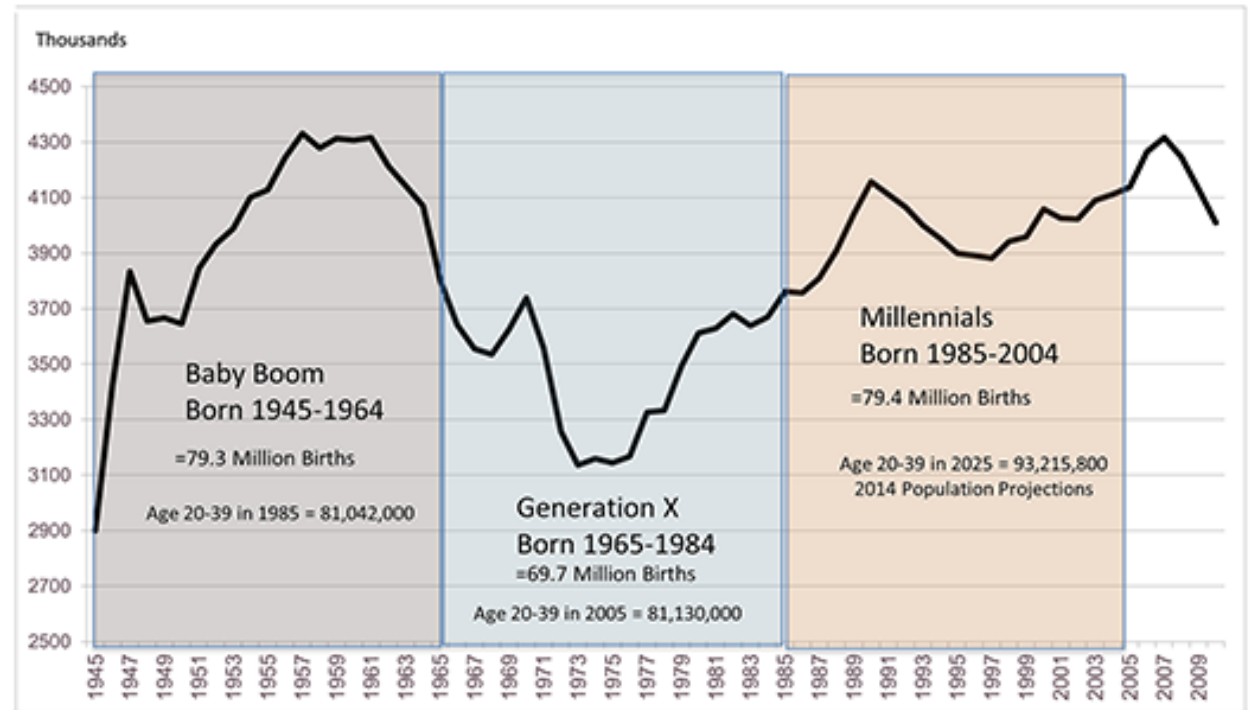
- Describe shifts in the educational environment that are contributing to fewer students in medical laboratory programs.
- Describe shifts in employment nationally, especially in healthcare since the pandemic.
- Discuss what motivates new graduates and other laboratory professionals to accept employment offers.
- Discuss what employers and laboratory staff can do to make the medical laboratory profession and positions in their lab desirable.

Factors influencing medical lab workforce shortage

Demographic/Economic trends

- Declining number of students
 - Children of “baby boomers” now past traditional college age
 - Upward trend of salaries for jobs without much education

Figure 1: Annual Births in the US: 1945-2010



<https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/defining-the-generations-redux>

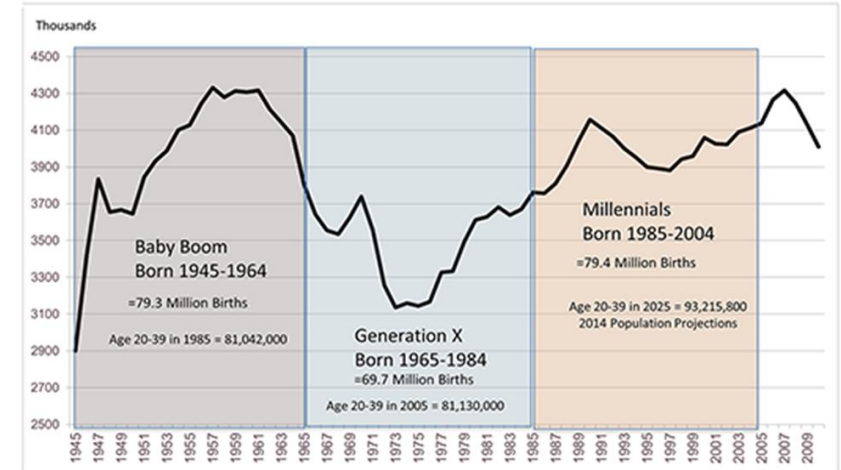
Factors influencing medical lab workforce shortage

CONTINUED

Demographic/Economic trends

- “Baby boomers” reaching retirement age
 - Medical laboratory staff **AND**
 - Medical laboratory educators
- Declining number of educational programs → relatively small and costly → easy targets
- Not enough people to replace retirees → jobs plentiful, salaries outside of healthcare escalating

Figure 1: Annual Births in the US: 1945-2010



<https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/defining-the-generations-redux>

Factors influencing medical lab workforce shortage

CONTINUED

Demographic/Economic trends

- Business/lab consolidations
 - “Core” labs diluting expertise in single disciplines → harder to train students
 - Centralizing microbiology to fewer sites → harder to train students
 - Increasing automation
 - In some realms like molecular, increasing test complexity
 - Consolidations/changes can
 - Reduce career opportunities
 - Affect wages
 - Eliminate jobs → “do more with less”

Factors influencing medical lab workforce shortage

CONTINUED

Demographic/Economic trends

- Diversity in labs
 - Nationally, medical labs EQUAL TO OR MORE diverse than general population with representation of Asian, Black and Hispanic workers
 - Nationally, medical labs LESS diverse with respect to sex-75% female
 - Recruitment efforts not very effective in ~50% of the population!

Factors influencing medical lab workforce shortage

(CONTINUED)

Pandemic effects on desirability of medical lab professions

- Positive
 - Exposure of medical lab profession to the public
 - Increased test volumes requiring highly skilled labor → upward salary pressure
- Negative
 - Fear of infectious disease/vaccination
 - Job conditions - long hours, stress, burnout...
 - Even more difficulty in providing students internships to create new professionals
 - Accelerated rate of retirement - “The Big Quit”

Factors influencing medical lab workforce shortage

(CONTINUED)

Historic patterns that persist

- Less visibility and prestige of medical lab profession to the public
- More focus on nursing shortages, even when medical laboratory shortages demonstrably equal or worse
 - Pay rates historically have been higher for equal or less education
 - Students and adults switching careers more drawn to nursing, especially when salaries researched
 - After gaining experience, many lab staff seek graduate careers (physician assistant, pathologist assistant, etc.) that have better pay and perhaps better hours

Major influencers of CAREER CHOICE in healthcare

Wu LT, et al. Why not nursing? A systematic review of factors influencing career choice among healthcare students. Internat'l Nursing Rev. 62(4): 547-562. December 2015.

- “Intrinsic factors, including a desire to help others and a personal interest in health care”
- “Extrinsic factors, such as financial remuneration, job security, professional prestige and job autonomy”
- “Socio-demographic factors such as gender and socio-economic status”
- “Interpersonal factors, encompassing the influence of family and other professional individuals”

Major influencers of JOB SELECTION

WORKING THE SYSTEM: MEDICAL LABORATORY SCIENCE GRADUATES' JOB CHOICE CONSIDERATIONS. Dissertation by J. Michele Stuart. August 2006.

- Study limited to MLS graduates; job selection influenced by:
 - Work schedule variables and control parameters
 - Work environment, especially flexibility and interesting/stimulating work
 - Familiarity with the organization/work situation → the more student clinical hours at a site, the more likely student goes to work there

Major influencers of JOB SELECTION

CONTINUED

WORKING THE SYSTEM: MEDICAL LABORATORY SCIENCE GRADUATES' JOB CHOICE CONSIDERATIONS. Dissertation by J. Michele Stuart. August 2006.

- New MLS job selection influenced by:
 - Clarity regarding job requirements
 - Employee benefits package
 - Experiences during clinical rotations, including experiences of peers
 - Opinions of others, especially other students and the faculty
- Salary
 - NOT a huge factor in this study because salaries were so similar from place to place (most sites try to be competitive with the market)
 - Currently a primary strategy in recruitment

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

Tailor recruitment/retention efforts to audience

- New graduates
 - If not already tied down, usually job hunting their last semester → tend to be more willing to move for a job, work at entry level to gain experience
 - Often more influenced by level of pay, shift differentials, recruitment bonuses, loan repayment
 - Often less influenced by benefits
 - Anyone under 26 can still be on parents' health insurance
 - Retirement seems very far away
 - May not have spouse or children that need health insurance, childcare, prescription coverage, etc.

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Tailor recruitment/retention efforts to audience

- Professionals already in the field
 - Can be harder to recruit away from current job than new graduates
 - Have adjusted life decisions to job
 - Moving is annoying, stressful and expensive/length of commute
 - Averse to disruption of benefits
 - Children's schools/daycare
 - Spouse's job/needs

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

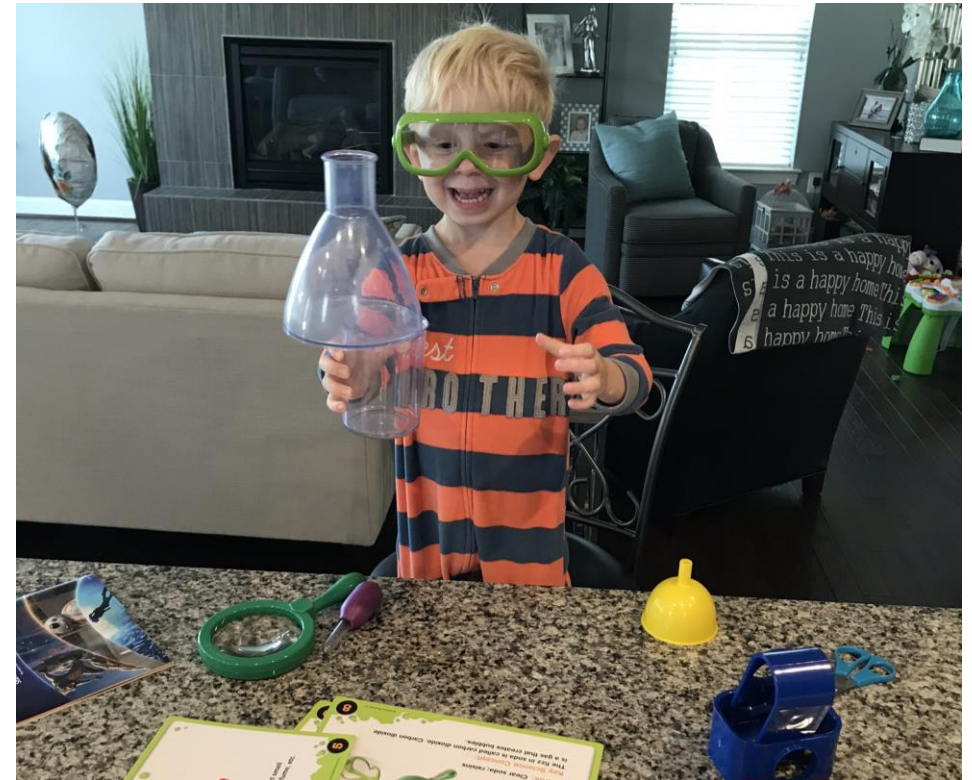
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Tailor recruitment/retention efforts to audience

- Professionals already in the field
 - Can be harder to recruit away from current job than new graduates (cont.)
 - Reluctance to give up benefits of tenure at current job
 - “Earned” day shift by working a lot of nights
 - Opportunities for promotion/better job by staying
 - Retention efforts may be more important in this group
 - Retention can be MORE important than recruitment of new hires
 - Loss of knowledge, experience, efficiency
 - Already trained
 - Important not to neglect taking care of current staff while in the pursuit of new staff!

“The power of visibility can never be underestimated.”

○ Margaret Cho



Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- Easy to focus on immediate staffing needs, but the process to create a medical laboratory professional can take years
- Recruitment also includes health fairs, career fairs, etc.
 - Middle school, high school and college students
 - Family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, children's teachers → you never know who has someone in their lives that might become interested!
 - Long term strategy that doesn't solve the immediate problem, but it builds the pipeline

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- Educate everyone you interact with and encourage employees to do the same
 - Promote profession and job opportunities in person or on social media, both professional and personal communications
 - Broaden professional contacts
 - Tools like Linked-In, Facebook, listservs
 - Membership/leadership roles in ASCLS, ASCP, AABB, AACCC, ASM, ASH, etc.
 - Profession is mostly white females → efforts reach more diverse audiences
 - Males are VERY underrepresented in medical laboratory jobs
 - Don't just celebrate Lab Week within the walls of the lab

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- If possible, incentivize employees to promote their profession
 - Job fairs, health fairs, classroom/science lab visits, career days, etc.
 - Include promotion within the institution → colleagues are also parents, family members, etc. of those who might be interested
- Incentives
 - Money (of course, but it doesn't have to be) - recruitment bonuses for hires
 - Paid time off from work to attend events
 - Option within the job
 - Participation in recruitment earns higher rating on annual evaluation, day off, free meal in cafeteria...
 - Participation in recruitment part of career ladder/promotion

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- Controversial and counterintuitive? Support laboratory personnel licensure
 - CLIA emphasizes test complexity vs. personnel qualifications
 - Loss of professional stature when insurance agents and manicurists must be licensed but not medical laboratory professionals
 - Loss of professional stature when non-professionals trained on the job for tasks for which they are not qualified
 - Less ammunition with administrators to hire certified personnel
 - Downward pressure on salaries
 - Diminished quality of work

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- Support laboratory personnel licensure (cont.)
 - Licensure NOT necessarily inhibitory to more medical lab personnel if it supports higher salaries, better treatment from employers and more interest in the profession
 - Resistance from within the profession strong
 - Self-interest - not wanting to take exams, pay licensing fees, etc.
 - Concern it further diminishes staffing pools

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- Reduce job title confusion and never use diminished job titles
 - Unclear/inconsistent job titles hinder recruitment efforts
 - Does anyone NOT know what a nurse is?
 - “Medical technology” to the public usually means CT scanners, MRI’s, etc.
 - Use proper titles “medical laboratory scientist” not “med tech”, “lab tech”, “tech”, etc.
 - Diminished titles = diminished professional stature
 - Read ASCLS/ASCP position paper

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Promotion of the profession and visibility to the public are everyone's concern

- Reduce job title confusion and never use diminished job titles (cont.)
 - Bureau of Labor Statistics combines MLT/MLS as CLT/CLS, averages the salary and says college degree required for both! Confusion at the highest levels
 - Explain all titles (cytologist, pathologist assistant, histotechnologist, medical lab assistants etc.) to everyone
 - Trained phlebotomists NOT equal to CNA's or nursing students
 - Especially educate Human Resources!

“If you want to go fast,
go alone. If you want to
go far, go with others.”

○African proverb



<https://www.topresume.com/career-advice/career-quiz-networking-type-personality>

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Network with and support educational institutions

- In 2001, per NAACLS News, estimated \$20,000 cost savings per employee when a student trained by the affiliate is hired (low recruitment costs, less training required, good retention, etc.)
- Good relationships with sites → faculty more likely to recommend them to students
- Does NOT mean networking only when there are job openings

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Network with and support educational institutions

- Clinical rotations can't be avoided for accredited educational programs
 - Medical lab programs already small and expensive
 - Instrumentation expensive and rapid upgrades of information tech and automation
 - Schools cannot keep up
- Employers can
 - Accept students for clinical internships, even when it's tough
 - Clinical sites have advantage in recruiting students who went there
 - Helps prevent educational program closures
 - Request geographical matching, when possible, to skew intern group to those who might stay

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

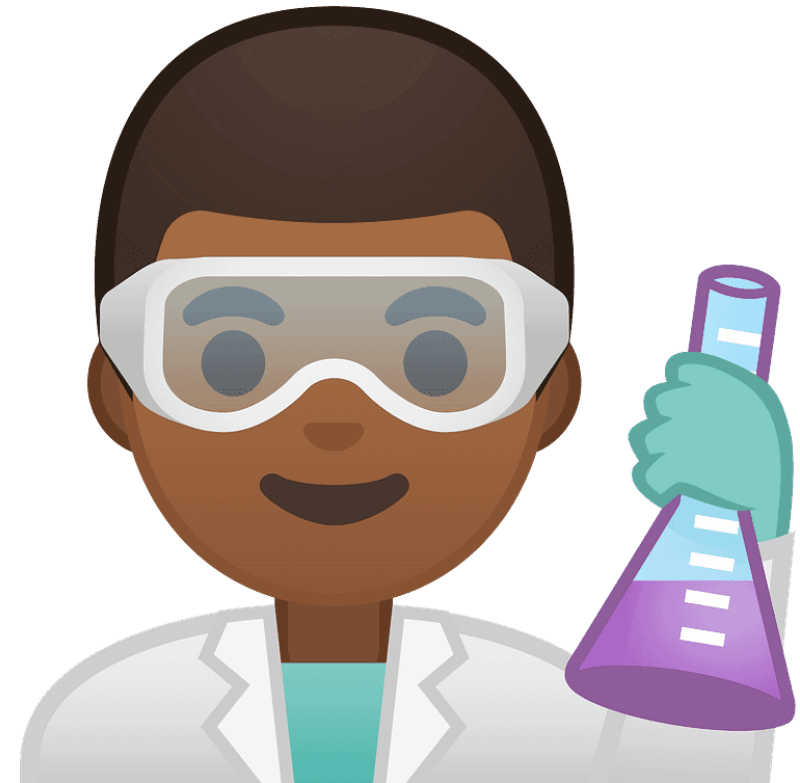
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Network with and support educational institutions

- Employers can (cont.)
 - If typical internships are impossible, work with schools to see what alternatives are possible
 - Offer assistance to students - scholarships, stipends, loan repayment programs, access to institutional childcare, free parking....
 - NOTE: STEM scholarships usually NOT available to medical lab students
 - Donate old instruments, reagents, supplies, etc.

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

○ Maya Angelou



https://creazilla.com/nodes/52389-man-scientist-emoji-clipart?tag_id=1772

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Create a “recruitment culture” at your workplace

- Every person, no matter what the job, influences whether students want to work there
- Staff behave as “hosts” → students/job candidates deciding if they want to work there
 - Staff should be friendly and welcoming when job candidates present
 - Students know when they’re being neglected if staff “too busy” to teach them
 - Staff should be sure students have someone to lunch with, that they know where the bathroom is, that they know where to go with questions, etc.
 - Staff should not gossip, complain, act unprofessional, etc. inside or outside of lab
 - Try to create an environment where current staff are happy so it’s conveyed to students
 - Address adverse staff behavior with students, including on annual staff evaluations

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Create a “recruitment culture” at your workplace

- When students are rotating at your site:
 - Consider sending them a “welcome” communication
 - Practical information - where to park, directions to the lab, etc.
 - Who to communicate with and how
 - “Looking forward to having you....”
 - Consider having pizza or something simple to talk to them informally
 - Ask how things are going in their rotations; show that your lab cares
 - Do NOT just talk to them about employment at your site

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

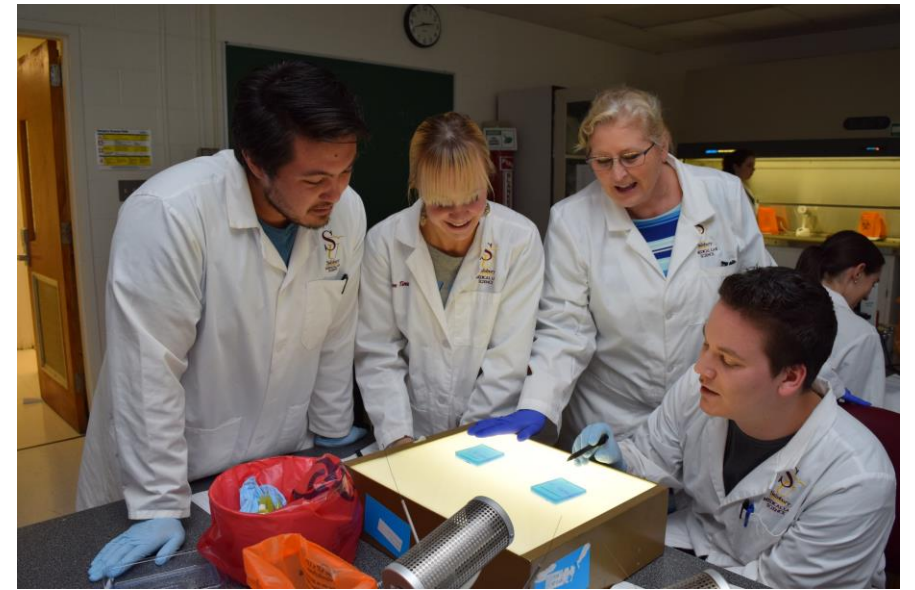
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Create a “recruitment culture” at your workplace

- When students are rotating at your site: (cont.)
 - Don't ignore/give less than full effort to students going elsewhere for jobs/grad school
 - Students can change their minds and will remember how they were treated when considering you later
 - Even if the students you have don't stay, they can and will talk about their treatment to others

“The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.”

○ Harvey Firestone



Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

“Grow your own” medical laboratory staff

- Advantages of upskilling/continuing education of current employees
 - Personalities and work habits already known to you
 - Work environment and co-workers already known to them
 - Personal situation already adjusted to the work environment (housing, commute, childcare, etc.)
 - Familiarity with lab/institutional policies and processes → faster to full productivity when employed at new skill level
 - Effective in rural areas where locals most likely to stay

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

“Grow your own” medical laboratory staff

- Develop current staff
 - “Upskill” phlebotomists/medical lab assistants
 - Lowest paid and highest turnover (salaries too close to non-healthcare jobs)
 - Staff feel more valued
 - Possible raises/career ladder/motivation to earn degree/certification
 - CAUTION!
 - Relying on cross-training between job categories to get more work out of fewer people can dilute expertise and reduce quality
 - This does NOT mean using MLT for MLS work
 - Staff could resent additional training that only gives them more work to do

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

“Grow your own” medical laboratory staff

- Develop current staff (cont.)
 - Support phlebotomists/MLA's to become MLT, MLS, cytologists and histologists
 - Support MLT's to become MLS's or categorical certificates
 - Support graduate work
 - Increasing number of DCLS - value and exposure to medical team/public (“right test, at the right time for the right reason”)
 - Preparation for supervision and managerial roles
 - Support
 - On-line education programs for your staff by providing clinical rotations/lab practice
 - In-person education with flexible scheduling and clinical rotations/lab practice

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Work with Human Resources, but don't delegate all recruiting to them

- Be your own applicant
 - Do an internet search of jobs in the area with multiple search terms
 - Does your institution/job opening pop up with all the search terms or just some?
 - How does your institution's website look?
 - Go through the actual application process yourself or get feedback from a candidate
 - Are there barriers? Ambiguities? Lack of information?
 - How long did it take HR to respond?
 - Is the process efficient and friendly?

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Work with Human Resources, but don't delegate all recruiting to them

- In your search, do competitors pop up? How do their websites/application processes/salaries/work environments compare with yours?
- Give Human Resources actionable feedback on the employment process
- Consider asking candidates during the interview how they found out about the job, how the HR process was, etc. to continuously uncover administrative barriers
- Make sure that your contacts know about jobs. Encourage staff to do the same.
 - Current/former lab employees
 - Colleagues outside the lab
 - Social media - the younger the job candidate, the more this may be important
 - Medical laboratory educators (naacsls.org)

Actual quote - ASCP Clinical Laboratory Workforce Study

- A participant opted to do a 30 minute longer drive to work because:

“...the culture in the one hospital just was really difficult to deal with versus what I had heard was a really good manager and a really good lab director and it made all the difference in the world. It makes such a difference to have a lab where people work together. They’re a team, they support each other.”

“Train people well enough so they can leave. Treat them well enough that they don’t want to.”

○ Sir Richard Branson



<https://www.cfoselections.com/perspective/what-really-matters-to-improve-employee-retention>

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Incentivize your staff to stay

- “Career ladder” structures as opposed to just years of service
 - Title changes (MLT 1, MLT 2; Senior phlebotomist, etc.)
 - Pay incentives
- Distinguish between “meeting standards” and “exceeding standards” on performance evaluations
 - Beyond typical evaluation criteria → assistance with lab initiatives
 - Examples: recruitment efforts, continuing education, mentoring students, participation/leadership in professional entities, etc.

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Incentivize your staff to stay

- Leverage instrumentation and processes to have workers operating at their highest skill level → job satisfaction
- Support friendly, collegial atmosphere
 - Good communication - “morning huddle”
 - Recognition - birthdays, life events, significant employment anniversaries
 - Celebrations - not just Lab Week
 - Students will see this stuff!
- Don't ignore social/interpersonal issues
 - Toxic personalities and dysfunctional social groups can drive staff away from even the best of circumstances
 - Difficult to address

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Take a hard, honest look at how you can make your employees happier

- Happy employees
 - Increased retention → more skilled workers → better speed and productivity
 - More effective recruitment of others
- Do a serious climate survey
 - Likes/dislikes
 - If you could change anything in your job, what would it be?
 - What can we do to keep you working here?
 - What are the deal breakers that would cause you to leave?

Strategies to increase medical lab recruitment and retention

CONTINUED

Take a hard, honest look at how you can make your employees happier

- Review results with an open mind
 - Be honest and open about limitations; show empathy
 - Note that if your employees want it, applicants may want it too → use the survey as ammunition to get things
- Sincerely self-reflect on ways that YOUR actions can make your colleagues and staff happier in the workplace
- “One size does not fit all” - every situation is different

“Clinical laboratories should communicate a meaningful message to students that relates to their personal wants and needs, not those of the laboratory.”

○ Michelle Stuart

Final thoughts

- For demographic and economic reasons, shortages in the medical laboratory workforce are likely to persist for some time.
- No magic bullet. As a profession, we must:
 - Improve our visibility and desirability as a profession with salaries commensurate with our value.
 - Improve our relationships, communication and networking with each other and the public.
 - Become partners with Human Resources but not delegate recruitment solely to them.
 - Strive for happy, welcoming workplaces that recruit new graduates and retain current employees.
 - Work not just on good salaries, but also on good work environments that incentivize staff to achieve, remain in the lab and recruit others.
 - Support achievement and upward mobility of our staff.
 - Promote professional parity with others on the healthcare team with respect to job titles and licensure.

Major References

- ASCLS. *Addressing the Clinical Laboratory Workforce Shortage*. <https://ascls.org/addressing-the-clinical-laboratory-workforce-shortage/>. August 2, 2018.
- ASCLS/ASCP position paper. *Standardizing the Professional Title of Medical Laboratory Professionals*. https://www.ascp.org/content/docs/default-source/boc-pdfs/about_boc/standardizing-the-professional-title-of-medical-laboratory-professionals.pdf.
- Garcia EC, et al. *Clinical Laboratory Workforce: Understanding the Challenges to Meeting Current and Future Needs*. ASCP/University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies. <https://www.ascp.org/content/get-involved/institute-of-science-technology-policy/workforce-initiatives#>. April 2021.
- Montgomery S. *Medical Laboratory Profession Needs All Hands on Deck Approach to Build Future Workforce*. ASCP Critical Values. <https://criticalvalues.org/news/all/2022/03/31/medical-laboratory-profession-needs-all-hands-on-deck-approach-to-build-future-workforce>. March 31, 2022.
- Stuart JM. *Working the System: Medical Laboratory Science Graduates' Job Choice Considerations*. www.proquest.com/docview/304987510?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true. August 2006.
- Wu LT, et al. *Why not nursing? A systematic review of factors influencing career choice among healthcare students*. *International Nursing Review*. 62(4): 547-562. December 2015.

Resources

Professional visibility and recruitment

- April 2022 ASCLS Today 36(2). <https://ascls.org/ascls-today/>
- ASCLS Career Recruitment Tool Kit. <https://ascls.org/career-recruitment-tool-kit/>
- laboratorysciencecareers.com
- ASCLS YouTube Channel. www.youtube.com/c/ASCLS.
- ASCP Inside the Lab/ Getting People in the Seats: Recruitment for MLS Programs. Free. <https://store.ascp.org/productlisting/productdetail?productId=132827593>

Thanks for your attention!

Questions?