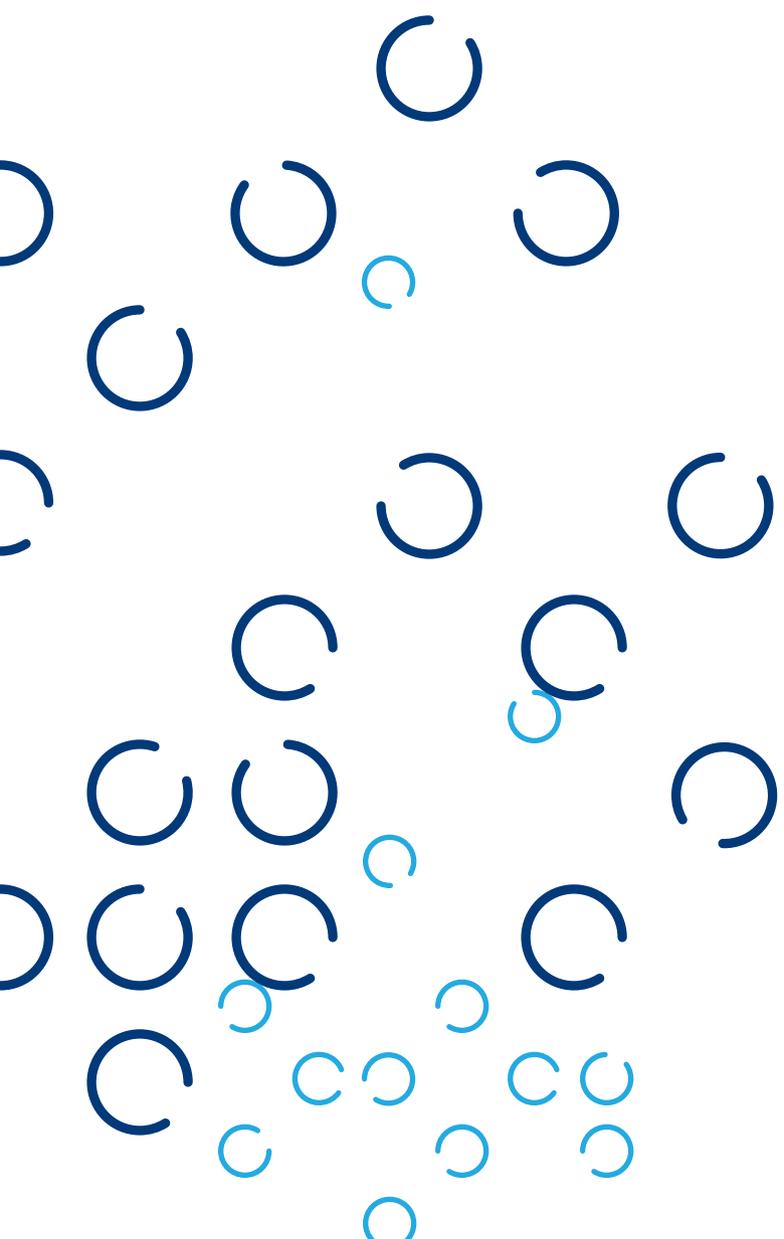


REVENUE CYCLE STRATEGIST

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• **staff development** •

Investments in Patient Access Staff Education Pay Strong Dividends

By Janell Madonna and Mary Beth Haugen

Registration staff play a significant role in patient satisfaction and revenue cycle performance.

Patient registration is the gateway to quality care and data integrity for hospitals and health systems. Patient access staff are the catalyst for the financial health of every account, essentially “teeing up” the future success of each claim. Because of the influence these personnel have on positive patient experiences and strong revenue cycles, many hospital leaders are working to manage the following patient access department challenges.

- > Managing high staff turnover rates
- > Supervising a department that operates 24/7
- > Managing decentralized registration models across various facilities
- > Ensuring data entry accuracy
- > Providing staff training and education
- > Balancing low pay scales by offering performance incentives
- > Ensuring strong customer service and communication during patient encounters



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Calculating Patient Access Staff Turnover Costs

Formula: $16\% \times (\text{number of employees} \times \text{turnover rate}) \times (\text{FTE hours} \times \text{average hourly rate})$

Number of Full-Time Employees	Annual FTE Hours	Average Hourly Pay Rate	Turnover Rate	Annual Cost of Turnover
28	2,080	\$1,500	40%	\$55,910.40

* Boushey, H., Glynn, S.J., "There Are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees," Center for American Progress, Nov. 16, 2012.

Source: Haugen Consulting Group. Used with permission.

The essential questions for many revenue cycle leaders are:

- > How do we improve the culture within our patient registration departments?
- > How do we move staff mind-set from entry-level position to long-term career?
- > How can we motivate patient registration staff to take pride in their work and better understand the tremendous impact they have on patients' experiences, data integrity, and overall reputation of hospitals and health systems?
- > What initial and ongoing training is the most effective to retain patient registration staff and sustain their work quality?
- > How can we structure and maintain decentralized patient registration models that support cohesive, unified, and seamless approaches?

Leveling Up Patient Access

With patient access departments experiencing an average 19 percent turnover rate, and with some hospitals reporting up to 40 percent, hospitals should implement policies and directives to reverse any negative perceptions or culture within their departments.

The benefits are significant for organizations that invest in "leveling-up" their patient access departments. Where do you start?

A 250-bed community-owned hospital with a decentralized patient access department across more than 80 primary and specialty care locations implemented the

following four strategies to develop a top-notch department.

Strategy 1: Hire a Systemwide Patient Access Educator

One of the recurring challenges in decentralized patient registration is lack of oversight. Department and ancillary practice directors must maintain managerial focus on broader issues, and they often do not have time or resources to address the day-to-day needs of patient registration personnel and offer consistent feedback to bolster job performance. Furthermore, patient registration positions can be pigeonholed as clerical in nature, requiring only initial training and limited supervision.

Hiring a systemwide patient access trainer provides cohesion and unity for decentralized registration staff. These individuals perform dynamic roles that include equalizing knowledge across all registration areas—an often neglected but critically important piece of ensuring efficiency and job satisfaction. Systemwide patient access trainers ensure training and educational materials are consistent, current, understood, and applied across all care locations—beyond the selected few who work in the hospital's registration area.

This position requires individuals with the unique ability to personalize education and training approaches to suit the various learning styles of staff. This attention to high-quality training not only ensures everyone is absorbing critical information but also injects empathy and demonstrates

respect for a position otherwise considered just a "stepping stone."

Strategy 2: Assess, Train, and Continue Educating

Onboarding new employees is a critical function that often sets the tone for success or failure. It's important to develop solid initial training material, maintain training documentation accuracy aligned with policy changes, introduce new procedures, and redefine existing practices.

Effective patient access training should include an opportunity to assess employee strengths and match them to appropriate positions. For example, patient registrars who exude exceptional empathy are better suited to working in departments requiring extra compassion for patients' conditions, such as cancer treatment. Registrars who demonstrate speed and accuracy are perfect fits for fast-paced, high-throughput areas such as the emergency department or lab testing.

Another suggestion is to ditch old training manuals and binders and move to digital platforms such as online courses, videos, and other interactive materials. Most people are visual learners, and although printed text on a page is important (and legally required), it should be supplemented with materials that motivate personnel to absorb, interact, and share. Modern patient registration training should include digital tools that enhance end-user experience—resources that go above and beyond words on a page.

Those who embrace and excel in patient access positions demonstrate a genuine interest to succeed, gain respect, and become long-term, knowledgeable, and dedicated staff. If these employees leave within the first year, it generally is the result of improper training.

Continuing education is another important component of strong patient access ecosystems. Beyond initial orientation, patient registration requires sustained and incentive-laden training curriculum that motivates staff to learn and rewards them with pay increases or job perks when completed. Patient access staff should be

encouraged to pursue continuing education and formal certification, with pay increases as rewards for achievements. This not only demonstrates that staff are an important investment in the overall health of the organization but also motivates registrars to succeed.

Strategy 3: Measure What Matters

Establishing performance benchmarks for patient access staff is an important strategy. Measuring competency is the key aspect of consistent performance reviews. Hold up the performance measuring tape to ascertain proficiency early and often.

Web Extra

Access a patient access staff dashboard at hfma.org/rcs/PatientAccessStaffDashboard.

Performance measurement must be consistent and frequent. Most successful, fluid patient access departments evaluate registrar performance at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals after initial hire, addressing the following goals.

Assess performance. Identify high-performance individuals versus those who need additional guidance or mentoring. Don't wait two or three years to assess registrar performance.

Instill accountability and responsibility in patient registration staff. If employees know they are expected to perform and will be regularly evaluated, they will remain focused and driven. Concrete goals and benchmarks motivate registrars and hold them accountable.

Conduct separate reviews for professional development and pay increases. It's difficult to engage with registrars who know that a performance review is about a pay increase or bonus. Staff may tend to be defensive or closed if reviews are not done with regularity and are tied exclusively to how much more money they will earn.

Strategy 4: Set Realistic Expectations

The challenges inherent within decentralized patient access departments require setting realistic and clear expectations for staff right out of the gate. Remind staff they are in the public eye and are often patients' introduction to their healthcare journeys. Looking at the bigger picture in terms of staff patient impact sets the correct tone and proper expectations of the job function.

To help registrars understand their impact on patient and family satisfaction, orientation and initial training should reinforce that patient access staff often help patients and families make important financial and care decisions.

Another important expectation to set is the fast-paced and often thankless aspect of patient registration. Hospitals and health systems are generally crowded, congested environments. Registrars must be able to quickly process information and block distractions to meet efficient, fluid, and accurate registration protocols.

Finally, patients entering hospitals, ancillary departments, or clinics have one goal in mind—to meet with clinicians. Patients are rarely pleased to meet registrars in lieu of immediately seeing a medical professional. Therefore, set realistic expectations for registrars in terms of the reception they may receive from patients whose foremost concern is their health and seeing their physician. Understanding this

reality helps temper resentment and empowers registrars to rise above challenging situations and focus on what matters most—ensuring positive patient experiences. Plus, registrars who demonstrate competency in their positions tend to be tremendous assets to hospitals and health systems as their careers evolve.

Going Beyond

Ensuring competent registrars consistently follow established workflows, policies, and procedures is one of the most critical steps to sustain financial health. Setting realistic expectations and providing timely, structured job performance feedback are important catalysts to improving the job culture and patient registration experience. Initial and ongoing quality training initiatives help make patient access a career rather than a stepping stone to another position within a healthcare organization.

Those who embrace a role in patient registration tend to become long-term, well-rounded, dedicated employees with a vested interest in the entire organization. They perform at a high level because they recognize and understand the important role patient access plays along a patient's care continuum. Demonstrating respect by ensuring patient registrars receive thorough, interactive, engaging, and sustained quality training throughout their tenure helps to elevate the role as prominent and is vital to success. •

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