
Strategic Approaches to Support Workers in the NHS: The Human Resource Management Issues and Challenges

Summary

Support workers providing assistance to professionals and patients have assumed a high public policy profile in recent years. They have been seen by government to contribute to the provision of patient centred services, the standards agenda and the adequate supply of labour. However, there have been few structured attempts to consider the human resource management challenges presented by these workers within this policy context: the ways support workers are recruited, the design of their jobs, the management of their performance and their terms and conditions of employment. The management of support workers in these terms clearly influences how support workers are used, the impact they have on a range of stakeholders and, in particular, whether and how they can be used as a strategic resource.

This project has sought to provide a more detailed understanding of human resource management approaches to the acquisition, use and motivation of support workers. More specifically consideration has been given to how such approaches influence the consequences of these roles for different stakeholders: the support workers themselves, the professionals they work with and the patients they care for. For each of these stakeholders, the role holds out the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes. The study has explored these outcomes and how they relate to the management of support workers. In particular, attention has been paid to whether the human resource management approaches and consequences have varied between and within hospitals, between different departments and by different

supporting roles. Starting in January 2007 and funded by the NHS Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) R&D programme for a three period, these issues have been addressed in four hospitals in different parts of England, concentrating on ward housekeepers and healthcare assistants.

Applying research methods designed to generate qualitative and quantitative data, the project is providing a strong evidence base on the management and impact of support workers from different stakeholder perspectives. It has placed particular emphasis on the patient perspective, seeking to explore and incorporate it through a form of social action research.

The project team has comprised researchers from the Said Business School- Ian Kessler, Paul Heron and Sue Dopson-, University of Oxford and Picker Institute Europe, bringing together expertise from the fields of healthcare management, human resource management and patient experiences of healthcare. The researchers have drawn upon earlier, recent experience in carrying out Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) funded work on support workers in a range of public services including health.

Project overview

The project has focused on the management and consequences of support staff roles in acute hospitals. It has considered the ward housekeeper and healthcare assistant roles typically found at levels 2 & 3 of the NHS Career Framework. The project has pursued four key objectives. The first has been an assessment of the strategic intent

underpinning the development of support roles. National policymakers have suggested different rationales for support roles:

- as a **relief** removing non-core activities from professionals
- as an **apprentice** providing a stepping-stone into qualified work
- as a **substitute** taking-on core professional tasks and
- as a **co-producer** providing complementary and distinctive capabilities.

Using these different conceptions of the support role, the study has considered the aims underpinning the deployment of these roles in trusts and the local policy context within which they have been developed. Second, the human resource management approaches adopted in acquiring, utilising and motivating support workers have been explored, paying particular attention to recruitment, job design, performance management, involvement and terms of employment. The third objective has been to evaluate how these approaches to the support worker role impact on different stakeholders:

- **Support workers** themselves – have these roles provided limited work opportunities or have they provided a chance for employees to develop a ‘richer’ working life?
- The **professionals** they work with – has the role allowed for the delegation of ‘unwanted tasks’ or represented an additional ‘burden’?
- **Patients** – has the role improved or undermined the level and quality of patient care?

Finally, **contrasts** in the management and consequences of support roles have been considered. The acquisition, deployment and impact of these roles may be crucially related to variation by trust, clinical field and the type of support role.

The research strategy has consisted of two main phases implemented over a three year period. During the first phase, interviews were carried out with trust leaders and key national stakeholders on strategic intent and policy development. Analysis of the national staff survey datasets has taken place to provide a benchmark for evaluation of local trust level data. Four hospital case studies have been undertaken in the second phase using the following techniques to generate qualitative and quantitative data:

- Interviews have been undertaken with support workers, professionals, managers and patients. Over 250 interview across the four cases have been completed
- Stakeholder surveys have been administered covering support workers, professionals and patients. In total surveys have been sent to around 1,700 nurses, 1,500 support workers and 3,400 recently discharged patients in the cases. The response rate has averaged some 50% across all group, remarkably high for such surveys
- Documentary material including job descriptions, pay and appraisal systems
- Focus groups of patients have been conducted involving around 70 patients
- Over 220 hours of ward observation have been complete involving the researchers shadowing support workers and nurses
- Three action research projects have been undertaken, with two complete and one ongoing. These have focused on intervening to improve or develop an aspect of the support worker role in collaboration with the hospital and its staff.

Case study research has been conducted in wards from the same two clinical fields ensuring that departmental differences in the nature of these roles are captured.

Project Outputs

The following projects outputs have been or will be delivered:

- Three full case study reports based on the qualitative research data have been completed and sent to the Trusts. A fourth is due in October 2009
- Presentations have been made on the initial findings to various practitioner and policy maker audiences including members Unison, the RCN and the Scottish Executive.
- A number of papers have been presented at academic conferences including :
Kessler, I. Heron, P. and Dopson, S. (2009) *Shifting Occupational Boundaries in British Healthcare*, SASE Conference, July. Paris
Kessler, I. Heron, P. and Dopson, S. (2009) *Opening The Window: Death and the Healthcare Assistant*, International Labour Process Conferences, April, Edinburgh
Kessler, I. Dopson, S. Heron, P. (2008) *Professionals and Assistants in the British Health Services: Friends of Foes?* EGPA Conferences, Sept. Rotterdam.
Kessler, I. and Heron, P. (2008) *Workforce Reform in the Public Services: The Working Lives and Journeys of Healthcare Assistants*, British Universities Industrial Relations Association Conference, June, Bristol
Kessler, I. Heron, P. and Dopson, S. (2008) *Shaping Workplace Roles: The case of Healthcare Assistants*, International Labour Process Conference, March 16-18, Dublin
- Individual trust reports presenting and analysing the survey findings are due at the end of October/early November 2009
- An end of project report is due at the end of January 2010
- An end of project conference involving national, regional and local policy makers, practitioners and academic has been arranged for early January 2010

Templeton College
University of Oxford

Email: ian.kessler@sbs.ox.ac.uk
Telephone: 01865 428500

For further information, please contact:

Dr Ian Kessler