

Using mobile technology to engage nursing staff

By Candace Smith, MPA, RN, NEA-BC

I'VE SEEN PLENTY of changes during my 30 years in nursing and health-care settings. I've also experienced many different work environments. In some hospitals, leaders fostered an efficient, collaborative culture using the latest best practices. In others, they struggled to keep staff engaged.

Katherine Virkstis, ND, practice manager for The Advisory Board in Washington, DC, shared results of a 2013 engagement survey for hospitals, titled "The National Prescription for Nurse Engagement: Best Practices for Enfranchising Frontline Staff in Organizational Transformation." The study found that registered nurses (RNs) are both the least engaged and most disengaged staff members.

This is troubling, Virkstis points out, because nurses are crucial in efforts to transform care.

Hospital leaders need nurses to be their most engaged staff members. (See *Nurse engagement: The distressing facts*.)

So how can a struggling staff transform into an engaged staff? Smartphones and other mobile technologies have begun to play an important role in keeping teams connected to each other and to patients. When customized for the healthcare environment, smartphones are the glue that can hold units, depart-

ments, and staff members together.

Recently I met with some of the dedicated nursing staff at Sarasota Memorial Hospital in Florida. Nurses at this 800-bed medical center connect with their teams and respond to patients quickly via hospital-provided smartphones. On a trip to Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, I found a sense of camaraderie and cohesion among the nurses at this state-of-the-art pediatric facility. To stay connected to each other and in close contact with the patients and families they serve, they communicate with smartphones using a shared hospital directory that shows who's available and who's busy. This allows everyone to engage with patient care and family needs and to respond to each other efficiently.

Let's take a closer look at how smartphones engage staff by improving communication, generating a greater level of trust among teams, and fostering a positive culture.

Communication means engagement

As a nurse, you need to be in constant contact with colleagues on your unit and in other departments. Inefficient communication can lead to frustration. Who's available or busy? Who's on or off the unit? How can you reach a pharmacist, respiratory therapist, physical therapist, or social worker? What about the transport and environmental services teams?

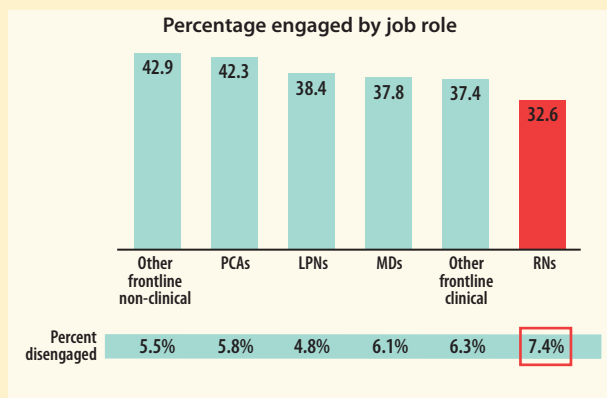
Here are some examples of how smartphone communication can keep staff engaged in complex care settings:

- *Connecting with other departments.*

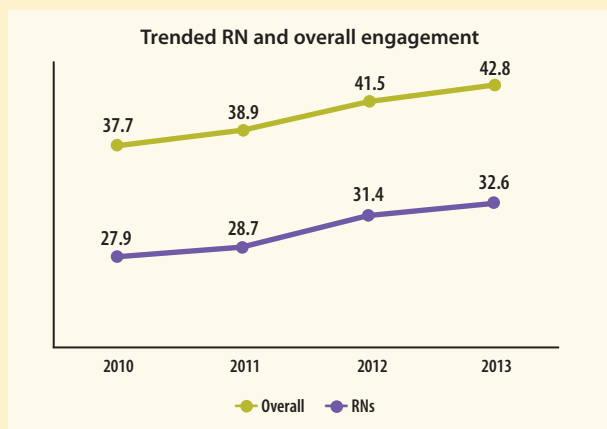
Smartphones are playing a key part in keeping team members connected.

Nurse engagement: The distressing facts

According to Katherine Virkstis, ND, practice manager for The Advisory Board, that company's National Engagement Database of more than 300,000 respondents at 250 health-care organizations shows registered nurses (RNs) are less engaged and more disengaged than all other frontline employees (see graph below).



Trended engagement data from the last 3 years (see graph below) finds that the gap between RNs and other frontline staff hasn't closed.



Graphs used with permission from The Advisory Board Company 2014, based on "The National Prescription for Nurse Engagement: Best Practices for Enfranchising Frontline Staff in Organizational Transformation."

Traditionally, pharmacists have worked in the basement of the hospital and have been hard to reach. With smartphones, nurses can send a text message asking pharmacists' advice or seeking their support.

- **Reaching specialists.** Respiratory therapists, wound care nurses, and other specialists roam throughout the hospital to work with patients, so they can be hard to locate. Using smartphones, nurses can send text messages or call specialists directly without noisy overhead paging or a prolonged search.
- **Bringing the whole care team together.** Nursing assistants and others traditionally have been left out of the communication loop. Smartphones empower

them with the connections and information they need to support nurses and patients effectively.

Building trust through technology

When you need assistance to reposition a patient, nothing's better than being able to find another nurse right away. A quick text message lets you reach out to request help without leaving your patient's side. If a new nurse wants to speak with an ICU nurse about a patient whose condition has changed, the new nurse can use a smartphone to call the ICU resource nurse directly to review concerns and changes.

In the hospitals I've visited that provide smartphones to nurses, the staff is much more positive because they know they can reach out to others and quickly receive confirmation that help is on the way. Unlike when they send a page or use overhead paging, nurses know immediately their message has been received. When they get a text message in response to their request, they feel someone cares. Healthcare organizations that provide the right technology to staff members foster their engagement by creating a trusting, positive environment where people feel good about the work they do.

Creating a culture of collaboration

Many organizations have made yearly improvements by strategically investing in engagement strategies. They use smartphones and other mobile technologies to promote patient safety, quality of care, timeliness, minimal interruptions, and a quiet environment. These technologies help prevent the communication breakdowns that can jeopardize patient care and negatively affect staff in general and nurse engagement in particular.

Another way smartphones foster inclusivity and connectedness is by providing a unified staff and provider directory. With just a tap, caregivers can search the directory by name, title, department, or unit, seeing at a glance which staff members are available or busy. This can affect the timeliness and effectiveness of care. Using smartphones to leverage the electronic medical record and barcode scanning with medication administration are additional ways mobile technology helps create a culture of collaboration.

Nurses in all healthcare settings touch lives. It's time for leaders to embrace mobile technology to help nurses work more efficiently and safely—and to see health care through a broader lens. Using smartphones to engage frontline nursing staff can improve communication, build trust, and foster a culture of collaboration. ★

Selected reference

The Advisory Board. The National Prescription for Nurse Engagement: Best Practices for Enfranchising Frontline Staff in Organizational Transformation. April 10, 2014. www.advisory.com/Research/Nursing-Executive-Center/Studies/2014/National-Prescription-for-Nurse-Engagement. Accessed June 19, 2014.

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