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Beth Swan, PhD, CRNP, FAAN  
*Thomas Jefferson University*

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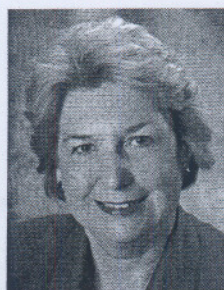
## Perspectives in Ambulatory Care

Janet P. Moye  
Beth Ann Swan

# Growing Ambulatory Care Nurse Leaders in a Multigenerational Workforce

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Ambulatory care faces challenges in sustaining a nursing workforce in the future as newly licensed nurses are heavily recruited to inpatient settings and retirements will impact ambulatory care sooner than other areas.
- ▶ Building a diverse team by recruiting nurses of different ages (generations) and skills may result in a more successful and robust organization.
- ▶ Knowledge about generational characteristics and preferences will aid nurse leaders and recruiters in attracting high-quality, talented nurses.
- ▶ Nurses of Generations X and Y can increase their likelihood of success in ambulatory care by better understanding intergenerational issues.



Janet P. Moye



Beth Ann Swan

**S**TATISTICS RELATED TO THE nursing shortage are well known. Despite the temporary lull in shortages in some areas that are fueled by the sagging economy, the fact remains that the nursing workforce is aging and insufficient numbers of new nurses are being produced to meet future needs. While the average age of all working nurses is approaching 44 years (Buerhaus, Auerbach, & Staiger, 2009), the average age of nurses working in public health and ambulatory care averages 49.5 years (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). Further, a large portion of the ambulatory care nursing workforce is predicted to retire in the next few years (Buerhaus et al., 2009). This challenge is not insignificant. According to Kovner et al. (2007), of 3,266 newly licensed RNs, over 84% were employed in inpatient hospital settings versus

only 3.8% in outpatient or ambulatory care. For a multitude of reasons, nurses with limited experience have not been encouraged to seek careers in ambulatory settings (Haas, 2009). A plan for recruitment and retention of expert and engaged ambulatory care nurses should be carefully planned and executed. Such a plan needs to not only consider, but also capitalize upon the differing characteristics of the generations in the nursing workforce.

Over the past few years, much has been written about the multigenerational workforce. In brief, four generations are employed side-by-side for the first time in history. A declining but still influential percentage of the oldest generation is still working. Aptly named *Veterans*, they were born before 1944. A larger percentage of workers are *Baby Boomers*, born between 1944 and 1960. *Generation X*, born between 1961 and 1980, and *Generation Y*, born after 1980, are the two newest generations entering the workforce.

While stereotyping people is not helpful, understanding how events have shaped the lives and influenced the preferences and values of current nurses and future nurses is important. For example, the Great Depression and World War II impacted the Veteran generation, shaping their views and values. The members are disciplined and pragmatic, having learned to live with scarce resources. Similarly, Baby Boomers, known for their strong work ethic, optimism, and desire for social change, were influenced by desegregation and the Vietnam War. Generation X workers, affected by economic uncertainty, single-parent families, and man-made disasters, tend to be skeptical and interested in transforming traditional corporate cultural hierarchies to flexible, horizontal organizational structures. Generation Y, having always lived with technology, grew up with a different reality, as well as with "helicopter" parents hovering to manage their lives. They tend to desire autonomy, may lack loyalty, but make up for it with the value they place on relationships with co-workers and managers.

Most authors addressing multigenerational workforce issues focus on improving workplace relationships, but do not address issues related to hiring, retention, and leadership succession planning. In the

JANET P. MOYE, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, is Assistant Professor, College of Nursing, and Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Public Health, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Executive Nurse Fellow, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.

BETH ANN SWAN, PhD, CRNP, FAAN, is Professor and Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Executive Nurse Fellow, Jefferson School of Nursing, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA.

NOTE: This column is written by members of the American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing and edited by Candia Baker Laughlin, MS, RN, C. For more information about the organization, contact: AAACN, East Holly Avenue, Box 56, Pitman, NJ 08071-0056; (856) 256-2300; (800) AMB-NURS; FAX (856) 589-7463; E-mail: aaacn@ajj.com; Web site: <http://AAACN.org>



July/August "Perspectives in Ambulatory Care" column (Swan & Moye, 2009), we defined leadership planning and succession planning, acknowledged the significance of leadership succession planning, described the different pathways and approaches in succession planning, identified leadership competencies, and discussed individual strategies and organizational strategies that can be employed related to succession planning. In this article, Part 2, the role multiple generations play in building talent and leadership succession is described. Emphasis is placed on the generational interaction and the impact of the multigenerational workforce in ambulatory care nursing. Strategies are recommended both for nurse managers who want to recruit and retain strong nursing staffs and for nurses who are identifying their own career opportunities.

### Background and Significance

Historically, American workers have held the belief that being loyal to their organizations would result in benefits for them. While this held true for the Veteran nurses, many who have worked for the same organization for their entire career, Baby Boomers were less likely to remain with the same employer for the duration of their career. Subsequent generations have had even less loyalty to organizations, focusing instead on their personal career and what the organization can give them (Dychtwald, Erickson, & Morison, 2006).

While career and job mobility are advantages to being a nurse, the flexibility and ubiquitous nature of nursing as a career are factors that draw many into the profession. Studies are showing that many nurses nearing retirement, the Baby Boomer generation, have been so mobile throughout their careers that they have not stayed in one place long enough to qualify for retirement benefits (Hatcher et al., 2006). As a result, these nurses are faced with uncertain financial security after retiring, if they indeed can retire. In a recent survey of RNs with an average age of 52, 62% responded that they did not have a clear idea of what their retirement financial needs would be (Osborne, 2009). Nurses early in their careers should be aware that, even though many organizations have changed their benefit plans to be more portable, the fact remains there are many advantages of achieving tenure in an organization. Prospective employers can highlight these advantages during the interview process.

Many nurses may not understand the benefits of staying in an organization: these may include seniority-based job security, benefits increasing with years of service (e.g., paid time off), and opportunities for advancement enhanced by knowledge of the workings of the organization. The key is to choose well when considering an organization to join.

Organizations are recognizing the high cost associated with turnover, but also, as Collins (2001) states, placing greater emphasis on getting the right people on the bus, as well as getting people in the right seats. To

**Table 1.**  
**Hallmarks of the Professional Nursing Practice Setting**

1.	Philosophy of clinical care
2.	Executive nursing leadership
3.	Recognition of the value of nursing
4.	Collaboration
5.	Advancement
6.	Development
7.	Participation in clinical decision making
8.	Availability of technology

SOURCE: AACN, 2004

build a great organization or team he recommends leaders should:

1. Begin with "who" rather than "what." Focus on prospective candidates who are more interested in the opportunity to work with a high-performance team than those who focus upon the convenient schedule or the short commute.
2. Recognize that the right people will be self-motivated by their inner drive to produce the best results.
3. Appreciate that if they have the wrong people, they will never have a great organization or department (Collins, 2001).

Managers can use information about generational preferences and characteristics to make more effective decisions about hiring, team assignments, work requirements, and even policy and procedure development. Interviewers who tailor the interview based on the characteristics of the prospective employee may yield better decisions, resulting in achieving a better fit and reducing turnover; a win-win for organization and employee.

A prospective employee nurse who approaches the initial interview with a long-term view may find that her/his personal career goals mesh with the organization better than one might expect. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2004) provides a guide to questions for new graduates to ask when interviewing. Entitled "Hallmarks of the Professional Nursing Practice Setting" (2004), this guide would be helpful for even more seasoned nurses who are seeking positions and want to maximize the interview process. The eight key characteristics or hallmarks defined by AACN are detailed in Table 1. Interviewers can encourage new nurses to play a more active participatory role in the interview process. This will increase their confidence in their skills and help them realistically and critically examine the organization as a fit for them.

Organizations, particularly those who rely on highly skilled "knowledge workers," are at risk when these



people leave and take their vast knowledge and experience with them. When gaps occur and essential roles remain unfilled or existing staff "double up" and take on additional responsibilities, organizations increase their exposure to risks and negative outcomes. In a health care organization, such negative outcomes are likely to affect patients. The loss of history and knowledge, the "corporate wisdom," as well as the workload and knowledge expectations of those who remain are concerns for nursing and nursing leadership in health care organizations.

### Impact of Generations

Developing future leaders in ambulatory care is an important role for nurse managers. In many ambulatory care settings, while a large contingent of staff are highly competent, experienced, older nurses, managers should calculate their anticipated longevity. In other words, using a sports analogy, the manager asks, "How deep is my bench?" and "Who do I have to step up to the plate?" Hiring more staff with similar demographics may not be the best way to strengthen the bench.

While nurse managers and administrators are examining their bench strength, so should nurses in ambulatory care staff roles be establishing their expert knowledge and specialty competencies related to their short and long-term career goals. In ambulatory care, where the specialized knowledge may be held by a few individuals in a given specialty, the need to pass knowledge on is essential.

### Recruiting and Retaining Talent

Generation X and Y nurses tend to be more career loyal rather than organization loyal. Organizations should continue to focus upon hiring the right staff and putting them in the right positions, but also articulating the opportunities that may be available for nurses to move within the organization for career advancement.

Both managers and staff should think broadly about opportunities for leadership experiences and development, rather than focus solely on formal management positions. Most succession planning focuses on the upper levels of administration and is based on the perspective of the organization identifying the roles and talent needed. Additionally, the new or seasoned staff nurse should accept equal responsibility in identifying the potential opportunities that resonate with their career goals and interests. Unit-based activities or functions, such as developing a staffing work schedule or peer review, give inexperienced nurses a chance to participate or observe activities to decide if leadership roles are an area of potential interest. Attending a meeting of a professional organization, likewise, may spark an interest.

Mentorship of nurses as potential leaders may facilitate their recognition of opportunities for growth they may otherwise miss. Managers and other mentors may find the following strategies helpful in supporting

the career growth of their mentees.

- Scan the organization to identify potential roles that match interest areas. These may include specialized departments that support functions such as staff development or quality improvement, or may be unit-specific roles such as assistant manager or patient educator.
- Look for opportunities to educate them about something that is of interest. Consider facilitating their membership on the unit-based quality improvement committee, participation in medical record reviews, or assisting the mentor/manager with a project such as evaluating new products or equipment.
- Encourage their membership in a local chapter of a professional organization.

### Mentoring and Developing Generation X

Developing leadership from within the ranks is possible, especially if the staff is capable and committed. Thinking strategically with an eye on developing leadership should be part of ongoing performance reviews and goal setting with ambulatory care nurses. The following actions are recommended for recognizing the characteristics and acknowledging the specific needs of Generation X (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

- Ask during the interview what is important to them and what they are looking for in the position. Listen to what you hear; expect to hear they want work-life balance and explain how that can be achieved in your organization.
- Stress the technology available and how they can contribute to advancing technological knowledge.
- Let them know that the environment is busy and multi-tasking skills are an asset; stress the degree of autonomy they can expect to enjoy.
- Use technology as much as possible during orientation. Show them the organization's Web site and where to find important information, and then leave them alone to explore.
- Give them resources and do not micromanage, trusting they are not afraid to ask questions. Let them know you are the "point person" and they will be free to do their job without the hassles, and will be able to avoid politics, which they hate.
- Form a committee that promotes an engaged and fun workplace. Generation X nurses will not want "warm and fuzzy," but like a workplace to be relaxed. Acknowledge those tasks that must be done without trying to sugarcoat the message. While Generation X does not want micromanagement, these nurses know to expect a certain amount of drudgery, and will respect your honesty.
- Encourage them to do some work independently. Generation X members view teams very differently from Baby Boomers and Veterans. Recognize when a Generation X employee has mastered the skills



needed to do the job well. This will likely signal that the individual is ready to look at advancement opportunities. Remember their loyalty is to their career, not the organization, so explore ways to make it a win-win. Is it time to assign more responsibilities in the unit or assist in moving up the clinical ladder? Perhaps there is a promotional opportunity in another unit that would be a good fit.

### **Career Planning Tips for Generation X Nurses**

Nurses employed within a health care organization who identify with Generation X characteristics may find the following strategies advantageous for developing their personal leadership potential.

- Do not be afraid to make suggestions. If you have an idea that will improve the informatics support of the practice setting or make the patient flow more efficient, let your supervisor and health care team leaders know. You are likely to be recognized for initiative and process improvement.
- Explore opportunities in the whole organization, not just your department, when you realize you are no longer challenged or otherwise believe it is time to "move on." Moving into another department within the same organization may offer you career mobility without losing your seniority and benefit level. Looking at internal openings that match your interests may provide a new learning opportunity and afford upward mobility.
- Find a mentor or career coach, someone who can help you assess your interest and evaluate options. A mentor can be someone in your workplace, a leader in a professional organization, or an advisor or instructor from your nursing educational program.
- Avoid burning professional bridges. If you decide to leave an organization for an opportunity elsewhere, leave on professional and mature terms. Often, situations occur in which a nurse may want to return to a previous place of employment, need a professional reference, or seek employment with someone within the network of a previous employer. Your reputation is one of the most valuable assets you can build.

### **Mentoring and Developing Generation Y**

The traits of Generation Y are vastly different from Generation X. While Generation Y has the technological skills of Generation X, and then some, Generation Y has an otherwise very different profile. Ambulatory care nurse leaders should consider the following tactics.

- Understand that Generation Y nurses like and need structure and attention; they were raised that way and it is comfortable for them.
- Realize they are inexperienced as well as friendly, but may be easily intimidated by others. They may have trouble relating comfortably with bosses, patients, and peers who they perceive as difficult.

- Be sensitive to potential conflicts Generation Y nurses may have with Generation X nurses. While older Baby Boomers may lump the younger generations together, in many ways their values and expectations differ.
- Match Generation Y nurses with mentors, because they will value working with seasoned people, like Baby Boomers.
- Motivate with inspirational messages; they are products of the terrorist attacks on America and have a strong sense of patriotism. They want to contribute to better society.

### **Career Planning Tips for Generation Y**

Generation Y nurses may not be welcomed with open arms in the ambulatory setting. Although the barriers to new graduates in most specialty areas of nursing have been broken down, many ambulatory care organizations still look for experienced nurses. Generation Y nurses should be aware of this potential barrier, and consider the following actions to overcome it.

- Remember, organizations are more inclined to hire someone who has had some experience on the unit as a student. If still in school, look for an opportunity for a clinical placement in ambulatory. A summer externship may be a possibility.
- Underscore Generation Y attributes that are shared with the Baby Boomer generation. Characteristics of being hard working, dedicated, responsible, and willing to sacrifice for the collective good will valued by potential employers.
- Stress your desire to work as part of a team. Although inexperienced, you are a quick and eager learner and will value the input of more seasoned staff.
- Do not become discouraged if your first efforts to get the position you want are unsuccessful; try again. Ask for feedback, be optimistic and resilient. Remember that your generation will be the nurses who care for the Baby Boomers as they age.

### **Implications**

Ambulatory care is well positioned to benefit by including the new generations of nurses to the mix of strengths and attributes of team members. Organizations that currently consist largely of older, experienced nursing staffs that embrace an infusion of new blood will thrive. Nurses who embrace leadership development and succession planning offer a legacy to the new generations of nurses. Failing to proactively anticipate the leadership needs for the future of ambulatory care nurses poses a significant risk that may result in a weak bench, without enough time to respond adequately. Ambulatory nurses should strengthen that bench with the nurses of tomorrow to continue to support the important nursing needs of their patients. \$

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out understanding what is happening with the nursing workforce.

**Buerhaus:** Beyond the nursing workforce, what are your other research interests?

**Spetz:** In addition to research on nursing and the quality of care and examining the relationship and impact of health information technology in hospitals, I have done research on hospital mergers and growth of multi-hospital systems in California, with an interest in how those multi-hospital systems use their power to bargain more aggressively with insurance companies for higher reimbursements and how those organizations could collude, which has labor market implications. I have also been doing cost-effectiveness analyses for a variety of projects, including a study of rifampin compared to isoniazid among inmates for tuberculosis prevention.

**Buerhaus:** Thank you Joanne for taking the time to talk with me. And thank you for focusing much of

your research on the nursing workforce. You have already made many important contributions and I wish you every success for making many more. \$

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