

Are there not enough hours in the day?

What the literature says about managing time through delegation and critical thinking

It's a question asked by new and experienced nurses alike: when the list of to-dos seems insurmountable, how should valuable time be managed?

A time-sensitive clinical setting leaves little room for wasted minutes, and with staffing numbers taking a hit at many facilities, nurses need to learn how to best utilize the workday.

"Someone in one of my past jobs told me that most new nurses have unconscious incompetence," says **Renee Boblitz, RN, BSN, BC**, clinical practice coordinator in the professional development department at Kernan Hospital in Baltimore, MD. "They don't know what they don't know. And that's true with time management."

As staff members learn the essentials about time management, they will realize that other equally important goals are directly linked to success in this area.

First things first: get organized

"When I was a staff nurse, I had a sheet of paper with a list of what to do that day," says **Fran London, MS, RN**, health education specialist at Phoenix Children's Hospital. "I kept myself organized in that I wrote down what I had to do on a preprinted template."

Experienced nurses such as London may have learned what keeps them organized and developed time management techniques, but new nurses have to determine their own method (e.g., keeping a detailed written agenda).

When instructing nurses about how to check off tasks on their lists—particularly inexperienced, new staff members—teach them to ask themselves, "What is the most important thing?"

Then make sure that they do that thing first.

They also must know how to look beyond the immediate results of an action and take in the larger view. "People often set their priorities on the short term," says London. "Include the big picture, the long term."

Delegate tasks to make room for new ones

A key aspect of managing the hours in a day is opening up a few more of them.

"A lot of time management issues are problems with delegation," says London. "What can they delegate to other personnel?"

Teaching this technique is important, says Boblitz, as it is often difficult for a new grad who is unsure of his or her own skills to delegate tasks to a more experienced nurse or nursing assistant who knows the floor.

"That can be rather daunting and intimidating," she says. "That's another thing preceptors and educators need to help them develop."

When this subject is not addressed, the results can be clearly seen. Recently, Boblitz's hospital was holding a program and noticed a new nurse walk down the hall to get a tray for a patient from the cafeteria.

"That's not something a nurse should have to spend her valuable time doing," says Boblitz. "That's something that should have been delegated to someone else."

Learn the role of critical thinking

"Setting priorities for new nurses goes back to being able to do critical thinking," says Boblitz.

New nurses, she said, need to be evaluated on their competency level in relation to Benner's novice-to-expert model.

However, she adds, it's difficult to encourage new nurses to use critical thinking skills from the outset.

"Most articles I've read say that it's hard to start critical thinking if the nurse doesn't have a couple years under his or her belt," says Boblitz. "But you can slowly begin to tie it in."

According to "A crisis in critical thinking," an article in *Nursing Education Perspectives*, "aggregate results for competency assessment of new registered nurses using the Performance Based Development System indicate that most new graduates do not meet expectations for entry-level clinical judgment ability."

One critical thinking technique that Boblitz suggests for improving time management is to have preceptors accompany new nurses on the floor as they attend to one or two patients.

While the nurses complete patient assessments, preceptors can continually show them how they can specifically apply critical thinking skills to normal routines.

These strategies can help teach new nurses how to manage their time.

"It takes a structured environment in order to set priorities and do appropriate time management," said London.

"Nursing school can't do it all; it comes down to preceptors and staff developers . . . It's really a continual process," she says. n

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Source: The Staff Educator, June 2007, HCPro, Inc.