Implementation of a pharmacy technician career ladder

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It is well understood within the pharmacy profession that the growth and expansion of pharmacy depend greatly on the professionalization and elevation of the pharmacy technician role.[1,2] In 1996, the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) released a white paper describing the anticipated growth of the pharmacy technician role and made a call for the pharmacy profession to find new ways to enhance the contributions of pharmacy technicians.[3] Seven years later, a follow-up white paper made another call to action, describing issues related to the professionalization of pharmacy technicians that could no longer wait.[4] Among these issues were the definitions of roles, responsibilities, and competencies required for pharmacy technicians at each level of practice. In 2016, ASHP published a statement on the roles of pharmacy technicians.[5] This statement identified the competencies for an entry-level technician as well as examples for potential advanced roles. These roles include managerial positions and responsibilities of obtaining medication history, purchasing, and performing final product verification.[5] While not an all-inclusive list of potential roles and responsibilities, this statement can serve as a guide to the implementation of a career ladder for pharmacy technicians. Each role can lead to the development of a particular job code and subsequent position description within a pharmacy. More recently, a career ladder has come to be the accepted method by which organizations can outline these roles and responsibilities, prioritizing professionalization, job satisfaction, and career commitment of pharmacy technicians.[6]

The 2015 National Certified Pharmacy Technician Workforce Study found that surveyed certified pharmacy technicians had moderate levels of job satisfaction and commitment and somewhat high stress levels.[7] The survey found a relationship between involvement in various work activities and commitment to the employer and profession of pharmacy. Of note, the survey also found that respondents were least satisfied with their level of stress, opportunity for advancement, and pay.[7]

Career ladders have long been used in healthcare as a way to create an opportunity for staff growth and advancement, while hopefully increasing job satisfaction and commitment.[8] Progress up the career ladder may come with salary increases or additional benefits, such as more favorable work scheduling or increased paid time off. Within the profession of pharmacy, the majority of the published literature describing career ladders is specific to pharmacists. However, there is minimal literature describing pharmacy technician career ladders. In 1 case, a career ladder was associated with lower pharmacy technician turnover and expansion of job responsibilities.[9] Another case describes a comprehensive program designed to increase stability and job satisfaction, of which a career ladder was 1 component.[10]

Here, the authors sought to better characterize and understand the impact of pharmacy technician career ladders on institutional pharmacies who have implemented such programs.

Survey description

A preliminary survey was created to collect information regarding the impact (both positive and negative) that the implementation of a pharmacy technician career ladder has had in institutional pharmacies (see the appendix). The survey aimed to characterize the nature of the institution and the job codes contained in the career ladder. The survey also asked respondents to identify any benefits provided to the individual technician (eg, increase in salary, improved work hours, etc), as well as any benefits to the organization (eg, improved job satisfaction scores, increased retention rates, etc). Last, the survey aimed to capture information about the challenges that a career ladder may have presented for pharmacy workflow, any unanticipated consequences of implementing a career ladder, and suggestions for those considering such a program.

The survey was posted online by the ASHP Section of Pharmacy Practice Managers. Responses were categorized into themes by all authors. Qualitative analysis of responses was completed using QSR International's NVivo 12 software.[11]

Observations

Twenty-two people responded to the survey, of which 17 had completed the survey. Five categorized their facility as a community hospital, 7 categorized their facility as a health system, 4 categorized their facility as an academic medical institution, and 1 did not respond to this question. The size of the institutions that responded varied from 50 beds up to 15,000 beds. Six institutions provide inpatient, outpatient, and specialty services, 7 institutions provide inpatient and outpatient services, 2 institutions provide inpatient and specialty services, and 2 institutions provide inpatient only services.

The number of job codes at their respective institutions ranged from 1 to greater than 10. The titles of each code varied as well, with the most common being technician I, II, and III (10 responses) and 3 responses indicating a technician IV category. The technician I code generally represents an entry-level technician with little to no experience. Someone with the technician II code has completed some form of orientation, is nationally certified, and/or has demonstrated competency in a required number of areas within the pharmacy. Progression to technician III generally occurs after a predefined number of years' experience, additional training/competency in advanced roles (ie, sterile product preparation, medication history, and informatics), and/or managerial responsibilities. The technician IV role is primarily a technician lead and/or obtained after additional experience.

In addition to the technician I, II, and III roles, some institutions created job codes based on individual responsibilities. Examples of this are a sterile compounding-certified technician, an automation specialist, or a medication history technician. Two institutions further delineated specialized roles as a I, II, and III.

Compared to the advanced roles identified in the ASHP statement, the job codes identified in the survey encompass 8 of the 14 roles. Only 1 unique job code was identified from the survey responses that did not fit into 1 of the 14 roles outlined in the ASHP statement, an operating room pharmacy technician.

Fourteen of the completed survey responses described the benefits to the institution after implementation of the career ladder, and 3 of the responses stated that the ladder was too new for any changes to have been noticed. The following 4 general themes were identified: improved overall job performance, improved culture through job satisfaction and retention rates, more competitive recruiting, and an increase in salary. Respondents stated that technicians appeared to be more motivated and had more ownership of their assigned responsibilities. Six responses commented on the improvement in overall retention rates, and 8 responses indicated that technicians were more satisfied in their overall job, as they had a clear path to move up in the institution. While not a direct benefit to the institution, 5 replied that with the implementation of the career ladder, they were able to increase salaries for technicians, which likely plays a role in the improved job satisfaction and retention rates.

Thirteen of the completed survey responses identified issues that have resulted from the implementation of the career ladder; 4 responses stated that they had not experienced any issues. The primary issues could be categorized as concerns with the perceived fairness of the ladder. Respondents stated that not all of the technicians agreed with the structure of the ladder, and some felt that years of experience should be sufficient qualification to allow for advancement. Additionally, respondents identified some initial resentment regarding the distinction between different job codes, that the requirements were too vague, and that the promotion process seemed to occur faster for some technicians, with the appearance of management "playing favorites." Concerns were also identified regarding the ability of technicians to advance in the job code. Since the codes are often related to a full-time equivalent, even if a technician met the qualifications, advancement could not occur unless a position was open. Additionally, if an institution requires a particular degree/level of education to advance to certain positions, career technicians that lack this degree or education may not have the opportunity to advance. One respondent stated that there are still issues with continued growth because once a technician reaches the technician III distinction, there are no opportunities for advancement. This could make it challenging to make the career ladder meaningful in a personal and professional way to technicians if there is only advancement to a certain point. Another respondent had concerns that the pay raise associated with advancement is not sufficient, and 2 respondents were still experiencing issues with retention rates. Last, 1 respondent stated that a lack of state pharmacy board regulatory requirements regarding entry-level qualifications negatively affected the institutional human resources needs assessment and subsequent pay-scale development.

Discussion

While data were limited, as this was a preliminary exploration, this survey does provide some initial insight into the experiences of those who have implemented a pharmacy technician career ladder. Additionally, this survey contributes useful information to consider for those interested in implementing a career ladder in their institution.

The overall consensus from the survey aligns with ASHP's 2018 *Pharmacy Forecast* report, as follows: "in your department's strategic plan, give priority to achieving a high level of professionalization, job satisfaction, and career commitment of technician staff. Recognize that this will probably require a formal career ladder that specifies how technicians can advance in their responsibilities and compensation."[6]

Also, the ASHP 2019 *Pharmacy Forecast* report recommends the critical need for certificate training for pharmacy technicians. To that extent, a pharmacy career ladder should incorporate the new credentialing programs that are being offered by the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board for validation of Advanced Certified Pharmacy Technician competencies. The 5 certificate programs under development are Technician Product Verification (Tech-Check-Tech), Medication History, Controlled Substance Diversion and Prevention, Billing and Reimbursement, and Hazardous Drug Management.[12]

When drafting a strategic plan to implement or modify a pharmacy technician career ladder, it is recommended to partner with human resources and compensation personnel and frontline team members. By creating a career ladder that facilitates whole-person growth and recognizes excellence, one can help ensure that the pharmacy technician workforce is compensated equitably given their credentials and level

of responsibility. If other departments within a health system have a successful career ladder in place, it is recommended to model the business case after their model. To help create ownership and set realistic expectations, respondents recommend using a hybrid staff governance model using feedback from leadership and frontline team members to determine each step within the ladder, including work experience and educational components required.

The unforeseen primary barrier that health systems face regarding pharmacy technician career ladders is the potential weakening of the pharmacy technician's core dispensary roles (pharmacy technician I, II, and III) as the pharmacy workforce climbs the career ladder into advanced roles outside the traditional dispensary function. The result is that as pharmacy technicians advance up the career ladder, we are seeing an increasing number of pharmacy technicians transitioning into advanced roles, inadvertently weakening the core dispensary roles.

For health systems to be change ready and resilient, the focus of a career ladder should be on advancing the profession of pharmacy technicians and the recruitment and retention of the pharmacy technician workforce, specifically for core dispensary roles as team members transition into advanced roles.

Feedback from the survey identified compensation for traditional core dispensary roles (pharmacy technician I, II, and III) as one of the biggest challenges and the most difficult to change significantly. To address this challenge, we believe that partnering with human resources and compensation personnel is a piece of it, but the main focus should be on the recruitment of technician I, II, and III positions and helping current pharmacy technicians transition and grow out of the traditional pharmacy technician services into advanced roles. If advanced pharmacy technician roles in community-based health programs are expanding and it is anticipated that 50% of the new hires will be internal, the recommendation is to have a succession plan that reflects the hiring and training of new pharmacy technicians in the traditional core dispensary roles to replace the pharmacy technicians transitioning into advanced roles.

The trend we see with health systems is recruiting for replacements after their pharmacy technicians in core dispensary roles transition to advanced roles. The result is that pharmacies are short-staffed, compounding unforeseen stressors that negatively impact the culture of an organization, such as uneven workload, reduced morale, quality, and safety, and subpar onboarding experiences resulting in increased turnover. Partnership with the pharmacy leadership team across the continuum of care as new advanced roles for pharmacy technicians are created will be key to successful expansion without stressing the model. Also, career ladders with opportunities advancing the profession of pharmacy technicians will help with recruiting, job satisfaction, and career commitment of the technician workforce.

Conclusion

A technician career ladder is an effective way to outline the roles and responsibilities of technicians. The implementation of a technician career ladder can help improve overall morale and commitment by providing advancement opportunities resulting in increased employee engagement and improved retention rates. However, when creating a career ladder, it is essential also to have a succession plan. As technicians move up the career ladder, they often leave the dispensary functions, which may weaken the core model. To ensure success when implementing a career ladder, it is essential to partner with human resources, consider compensation, and engage the frontline team members.

Disclosures

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Additional information

Some portions of the results/data/figures in this manuscript has been published elsewhere and written permission to reproduce or adapt previously published material has been obtained.

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Appendix—Survey instrument

1. How would you categorize your institution?

   A. Academic medical center
   B. Health system
   C. Community hospital
2. How many beds does your institution serve?
3. Which of the following services does your institution offer? (Please select all that apply)
   A. Inpatient pharmacy
   B. Outpatient pharmacy
   C. Specialty pharmacy
4. How many pharmacy technician job codes does your institution have?
5. Please define the job description and requirements for each of the pharmacy technician job codes identified in question 4.
6. Please define the qualifications for each of the pharmacy technician job codes identified in question 4.
7. Please describe any benefits you have seen from the implementation of a career ladder, for example, improved job satisfaction scores, retention rates, etc.
8. Please describe any issues that you have seen from implementation of the pharmacy technician career ladder.
9. As pharmacy technicians progress through the career ladder, how do you ensure that the core dispensary functions of the pharmacy are not impacted?
10. Based on your experience, what lessons have you learned from implementation of the pharmacy technician career ladder?
11. Based on your experience, do you have any recommendations or suggestions for pharmacies considering implementing a pharmacy technician career ladder?