



Mercy Hospital Joplin Increased Productivity Utilizing Schedule Excellence



A foundation for success

Mercy Health, based in St. Louis, MO, has provided quality healthcare for over 150 years with locations in MO, OK, and AR. Today, it continues to provide nationally recognized care with awards including being named one of the top five large U.S. health systems from 2016 to 2019 by IBM Watson Health, recognized in 2018 as "Most Wired" healthcare organization by the American Hospital Association - the fifteenth time since 1999, and identified as a top American employer by Forbes magazine, ranking 108 among 500 employers in the U.S. and spanning 25 industries, to name a few.

In August 2016, Mercy began a three-year engagement with Accumen that included services for lab operations, strategic sourcing and supply chain, and patient blood management. Mercy saw numerous successes through this engagement. One in particular was Schedule Excellence at its Joplin, MO hospital.

Schedule Excellence

Accumen implements Schedule Excellence as part of the Lab Excellence package. Schedule Excellence utilizes laboratory data to compare hourly volumes with the number of employees staffed at that hour. This program management tool uses a practical approach for building and maintaining a master lab schedule. Accumen's program identifies gaps between test volumes and employee workloads. It assists health systems' labs with achieving consistency and creates a standardized approach to test volume analysis, staffing and scheduling.

"Schedule Excellence is essential for effective lab management. Effective staffing levels and schedules, developed based on accurate data, can decrease lab labor cost, increase efficiency, and influence lab management decisions and actions," said Katie Benyo, MHA, CSSBB, Lab Excellence at Accumen.

Implementing new tools

Accumen's Schedule Excellence product was deployed across Mercy labs within the first year of engagement, and it revealed a disparity in employee workloads. Some employees were overworked at certain hours of the day while some had underutilized capacity. Accumen recommended two steps for improvement:

1. Adjust schedules to balance workloads and create an optimal schedule.
2. Minimize staffing to increase lab productivity.

Lisa Lawrence, lab director, Mercy Hospital Joplin, says, "After implementing Schedule Excellence, we saw improvements in our lab's productivity, even enabling us to increase test volumes at that time."

Scheduling based on test volumes

Mercy reviewed the data to determine appropriate resources and schedule staff based on test volumes. This created an opportunity for efficiency. "Staffing based on volumes also optimizes scarce labor resources, which we see as a significant challenge for many health systems' labs right now," said Katie Benyo.

Mercy also utilized data to make difficult decisions. Often, lab directors don't use applicable data because change can be hard, not only for the leader but for the employees as well. Leaders and employees alike don't always want to shift schedules. But Mercy Hospital Joplin was different – leadership and staff were open to change, and they were cost conscious. Lawrence was very transparent with staff. She put them first and asked them to support her in an effort to improve.

Improved culture

Lawrence and team set to action planning, regular staff meetings, and continuously surveyed employees. She also changed incorrect perceptions with data. Staff reviewed graphs on scheduling and productivity and considered alignment with when they “felt” the busiest. ***“An improved picture through data enabled us to make better decisions, assess past performance, and predict future performance to create an accurate plan,”*** said Lawrence.

In addition, Lawrence and team made staff aware of lab goals, and staff sometimes even asked for shift adjustments that were both conducive to lab productivity and supportive of their work/life balance. Lawrence and team were able to change weekend staffing levels, reduce expensive overtime hours, and move some employees to part-time from full-time at their request. These actions created cost savings and improved productivity within the lab.

Cross training

Staff were also utilized to complete other duties, as cross-training took place for all lab techs and support staff. Cross-training staff increases flexibility and reduces costs by leveraging internal talent. When test volumes are low, one tech can cover multiple benches. Lab support staff can also be fully utilized by taking on some additional tasks, allowing techs to operate at “top of license.” Accumen's Schedule Excellence offers a cross-training matrix tool to identify opportunities for training. This enabled Mercy staff to receive education on additional lab areas instead of being siloed in one spot. Training timeline varies depending on the complexity of the tasks.

Process improvement

The Lab Excellence program also revealed opportunities for process improvement. These areas included reducing errors on the automation line, increasing auto-verification rates by reviewing and updating system rules, increasing utilization of Beaker labels outside of lab, and implementing phlebotomy swarm for the inpatient morning run collections.

Seeing real results

In addition to optimizing the schedule, Mercy Hospital Joplin was able to reduce staffing levels by five full-time equivalents over time, without a single reduction in force. Employees left through natural attrition, retirement, or requests to move to part-time, along with reductions in overtime. This smaller employee size created significant cost savings for a lab of this size, without putting a strain on current employees. Instead, staff were reaping the benefits of Schedule Excellence – a balanced workload, utilization at full capacity, additional cross-training as professional development, strong leadership and transparency, and a culture of continuous improvement. Mercy's lab employees stated that they weren't “busier” and didn't feel overworked or overwhelmed, even though Mercy's volume increased significantly at that time.

Learn more about Schedule Excellence

Your laboratory is a strategic asset to your overall health system. That's why it is vitally important to ensure that lab staffing and scheduling match lab test volumes. Health systems will never know true opportunities or successes without accurate data analysis and assessments.

Accumen can provide the experts and analysis needed to assess staffing and scheduling, identify gaps in cross-training, and improve process efficiencies. In addition, Accumen provides expert guidance in all areas of lab operations, including skillful and professional planning along the way, and the knowledge needed to enable your leaders and teams to achieve smooth and successful results.