

Salary/Career Survey

Overtime, new grads help stretch staffing in hospital operating rooms

Staff shortages continue to challenge OR managers and directors, according to the 18th annual *OR Manager* Salary/Career Survey for 2008. In the eighth year the staffing questions have been asked, the percentage of open positions was unchanged for RNs, with positions open slightly longer than a year ago. Once again, nearly two-thirds of leaders (62%) said it was difficult to recruit RNs. The average number of open surgical technologist (ST) positions jumped to almost double the rate in 2006, although the turnover rate for STs was the lowest in the past 8 years.

The *OR Manager* Salary/Career Survey was mailed in April to 800 *OR Manager* subscribers who are directors of hospital ORs; 312 were returned for a response rate of 39%. The margin of error is ± 4.8 at the 95% confidence level. A separate survey was sent to managers of ambulatory surgery centers (see page 12). Results from the remainder of the survey, including salaries and benefits, will appear in the October issue.

Vacancy rates

The vacancy rate for RNs was 10%, the same as in last year's survey, compared to the 7% reported in 2006. Vacancy rates weren't much better for STs: 8% compared to 9% last year and 6% in 2006.

For all RNs nationally in 2007, the average vacancy rate was 8.1%, according to the American Hospital Association, up from vacancy rates of around 4% in the mid to late 1990s.

Experts still see a major shortage on the horizon for all RNs. A new model by nursing workforce expert Peter Buerhaus, RN, PhD, FAAN, of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, predicts "an overwhelmingly large" shortage of RNs will start developing about 2015, reaching about 500,000 by 2025. A positive trend is the renewed interest in nursing by people born in the 1970s and early 1980s. But that won't be enough to forestall the shortage as baby boomer RNs retire, Buerhaus and his coauthors advise in their comprehensive new book, *The Future of the Nursing Workforce in the United States* (Jones & Bartlett, 2008).

Buerhaus confirms a trend OR managers are already well aware of—shortages will develop sooner in units like the OR and postanesthesia care unit that have a large number of diploma-prepared RNs. Many of these nurses received their basic education before the 1970s, when diploma education was common. Because diploma students had more exposure to hospital units, including the OR, they were more likely than today's students to choose a career in the OR. Later, with the shift away from diploma education, younger students didn't receive as much exposure to the OR and were less likely to focus there.

Open positions

In the *OR Manager* survey, the average number of open RN positions in ORs decreased slightly to 3.3 from 4.1 in 2007 but is still high compared to 1.9 in 2006. The number of open ST positions continued upward (2.1 in 2008 versus 1.5 in 2007 and 1.1 in 2006).

Open RN positions are staying vacant longer, 16.5 weeks this year compared to 15 weeks in 2007 and 13 weeks in 2006. The length of time ST positions are open was essentially unchanged from last year (11.3 weeks vs 12 weeks) but was up from 9 weeks in 2006.

In all, 38% of hospitals had no openings for RNs, and 54% had no openings for STs,

Hospital respondents to survey

Region	Response
Northeast	18%
Midwest	39%
South	29%
West	15%

roughly the same as 2007's 41% for RNs and 58% for STs.

Variations by region, type of facility

Like last year, the South had the highest average number of open RN positions (4.1 in 2008 versus 5.4 in 2007). Averages for the Midwest and the West were similar and about the same as in 2007, at 3.2 and 3.1, respectively. The Northeast had the lowest average number of open RN positions at 2.2. For RN vacancy rates, the West (14%) and the South (12%) again claimed the top 2 spots, and both percentages were slightly higher compared to 2007. ST vacancy rates were similar across the country.

In the Northeast, the average number of weeks RN positions was up from 15.9 in 2007 to 18.4 this year, although the number of weeks for open ST positions declined from 15.5 to 9.5. Once again, the West reported the longest time to fill positions, with an average of 20 weeks for RNs and 14.3 for STs.

Teaching hospitals experienced more staffing problems than community hospitals. The average number of open ST positions in teaching hospitals nearly doubled from 2007 (4.0 in 2008 versus 2.1 in 2007) and was much higher than the 1.6 for community hospitals.

Interestingly, the vacancy rate for ST positions in teaching hospitals dropped from 8% last year to 4% in 2008. And the average number of weeks ST positions remained open fell from 12.4 to 7.7. Open RN positions at teaching hospitals stayed vacant an average of 19 weeks, compared to 14.3 in 2007. Community hospitals reported 15.8 weeks, unchanged from 2007.

Staff turnover

The average turnover rate for RNs was 7%, consistent with data for the past 5 years. However, the turnover rate for STs was 5%, the lowest in the past 8 years.

The Northeast's RN turnover rate rose from 5% in 2007 to 9% this year, the largest increase of any region. The West had the highest turnover rate with 10%, compared to 11% in 2007. The RN turnover rate was 6% for the Midwest, the same as the 6% from last year, and RN turnover was 8% for the South, compared to 10% in 2007.

The South also saw improvement in ST turnover—5% compared to 9% in 2007. The only region that didn't see improved ST turnover was the Northeast, which reported 7%, about the same as 6% last year.

When it comes to turnover, teaching hospitals have the edge over community hospitals, with lower staff turnover rates for both RNs and STs.

Less reliance on contract staff

Despite a continued staffing crunch, ORs are using fewer contract staff. After a high of 32% in 2007, this year 22% of respondents reported routine use of agency or travel nurses, a number more consistent with data from 2001 to 2006. Of those who used temporary staff, 23% reported that agency and travel nurses comprised 10% to 29% of staff,



How often does your OR use overtime to staff its ORs?

	Type of facility		
	Overall	Community	Teaching
Always or almost always	29%	27%	39%
Occasionally	53%	54%	44%
Rarely	13%	15%	11%
Never	0%	0%	0%

Average number of open FTE positions in ORs

	Type of facility			Region			
	Overall	Community	Teaching	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
RNs	3.3	2.6	5.7	2.2	3.2	4.1	3.1
STs	2.1	1.6	4.0	2.7	1.9	2.3	1.7

What percentage of budgeted FTE positions are open?

	Type of facility			Region			
	Overall	Community	Teaching	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
RNs	10%	11%	8%	8%	9%	12%	14%
STs	8%	9%	4%	7%	9%	7%	10%

Average staff turnover rate

	Type of facility			Region			
	Overall	Community	Teaching	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
RNs	7%	8%	6%	9%	6%	8%	10%
STs	5%	5%	5%	7%	4%	5%	6%

Note: Turnover was defined as the percent of staff who have left and been replaced in the past year.

Average number of weeks positions have been open

	Type of facility			Region			
	Overall	Community	Teaching	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
RNs	16.6	15.8	19.0	18.4	14.1	16.4	20.0
STs	11.3	12.3	7.7	9.5	10.6	11.6	14.3

ORs that use agency or travel nurses to fill budgeted positions

	Type of facility			Region			
	Overall	Community	Teaching	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
	22%	22%	22%	21%	14%	24%	41%

Note: Number responding was 295.

OR skill mix remains consistent

The ratio of RNs to surgical technologists (STs) in hospital ORs remains virtually unchanged from a year ago according to the 2008 *OR Manager* Salary / Career Survey. The ratio for 2008 was 62:38, similar to 2007's 64:37.

Over the past 10 years, the ratio has shifted slightly from 66:33 in 1998.

Federal regulations say surgical technologists (STs) and licensed practical/vocational nurses may assist in circulating duties with an RN immediately available. Currently, 34 states specify an RN as the circulator, according to AORN.

The percentage of hospital survey respondents who have STs circulating with an RN in the same room remained at 7% this year. Only 1% reported that STs circulate with an RN immediately available.

One hospital—a teaching facility in the Midwest with 10 or more ORs—reported that STs circulate on their own.

Of the 25 hospitals that said STs circulate, either with an RN supervisor in the same room (21) or immediately available (4):

- 15 are community hospitals
- 16 have 10 or more ORs
- 4 are small with 1 to 4 ORs.

A small number of respondents (2%, or 58 hospitals) reported having a 100% RN staff, and 18% reported 75% to 99% RNs. The most common percentage was 50% to 74%, reported by 215 hospitals (72%).

Skill mix in ASCs

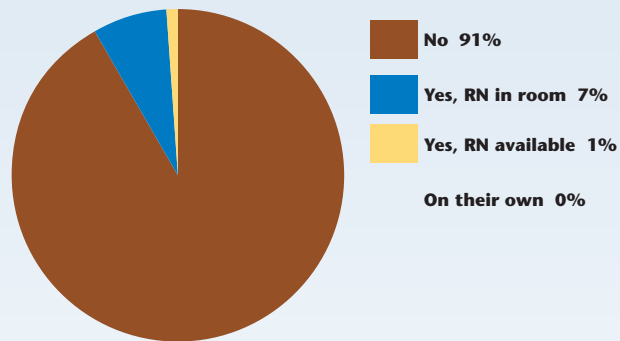
Ambulatory surgery centers (ASCs) reported an average skill mix of 66% for RNs and 34% for STs, the same as last year.

The percentage of ASCs that allow STs to circulate either with an RN in the room or immediately available is 13% (n=32).

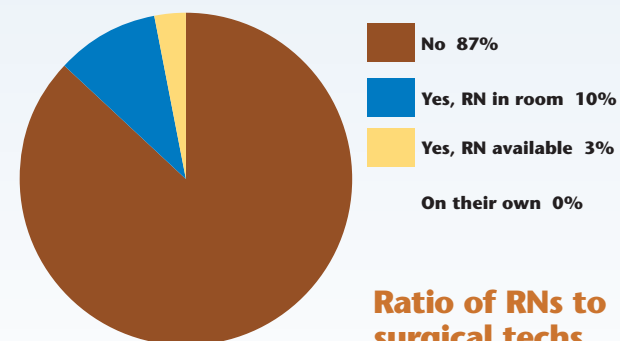
Of these, 22 are physician owned, and 3 are joint venture facilities. No ASCs reported that STs circulate on their own.

Do surgical techs circulate?

Hospitals



Ambulatory surgery centers



Ratio of RNs to surgical techs

2008	62:38
2006	63:37
1996	66:38

and 28% reported they comprised 1% to 2%. Community and teaching hospitals were equally likely to use contract staff (22%).

As in the past 2 years, use of contract staff was highest in the West at 41%, but the percentage was lower compared to last year (54%) and 2006 (46%). The South was next at 24%, down from 30% last year, with the Northeast close behind at 24% compared to 37% in 2007. Like last year, the Midwest reported the lowest use of contract staff, 14%, lower than the 19% reported for 2007.

What to do?

Most OR nurse leaders used overtime and hired new graduate nurses or RNs without OR experience as ways for meeting staffing challenges.

Similar to last year, more than half (53%) of respondents occasionally use overtime to staff the OR, with 29% reporting using overtime always or almost always. Community and teaching hospitals were about equal in their use of overtime. No hospital reported never using overtime.

Both community and teaching hospitals continue to hire new graduate nurses, with more than half (55%, the same as last year) employing them.

Teaching hospitals throw the door open wider. More than two-thirds (70%) of teaching hospitals hire new grads, much higher than community hospitals (51% for the past 2 years).

Little regional variation exists, although the Northeast was the most likely (58%) to hire novices compared to other regions. More than half (55%) of respondents from the South and the West reported hiring new grads, slightly higher than the Midwest (53%).

Size does matter. As in 2007, more than two-thirds (70%) of hospitals with 10 or more ORs hire new grads, compared to 43% for hospitals with 5 to 9 ORs and 38% for hospitals with 1 to 4 ORs.

As has been the case in recent years, most hospitals (84%) hire RNs without OR experience, although regional variations exist. The Midwest is most likely (93%) to use this option followed by the Northeast (85%), South (75%), and West (73%).

Only 14% of hospitals don't hire new grads or nurses without OR experience. ❖

—*Cynthia Saver, RN, MS*

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