

Beyond Numbers: Transforming DSP Retention Through Education and Upskilling

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Abstract

In the ever-evolving landscape of workforce dynamics, understanding the trends shaping recruitment and retention is paramount. Exploring innovative strategies in crafting benefit packages, promoting wellness initiatives, fostering community integration, and facilitating professional development opportunities to proactively address these challenges. Specifically, within campus and community-based programs serving individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD), high turnover rates among Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) pose significant challenges. Through a comprehensive examination of turnover dynamics and concrete retention strategies, this paper underscores the pivotal role of education and upskilling in addressing turnover and enhancing retention. Education and upskilling not only empower DSPs to navigate challenges with resilience but also foster increased job satisfaction and confidence. By prioritizing continuous learning, organizations can ensure a skilled and motivated workforce, ultimately contributing to enhanced retention and a more stable future in the Human Services sector.

Introduction

As we find ourselves on the brink of a transformative era in the workforce, it becomes essential to delve into the prevailing trends shaping the realms of recruitment and employee retention. Adopting a proactive and visionary approach necessitates the exploration of innovative avenues in crafting benefits packages, instigating employee wellness initiatives, fostering community engagement, and facilitating professional development opportunities.

Within campus and community-based programs catering to individuals with I/DD, the persistent challenges of high turnover and insufficient retention rates demand urgent attention. A recent report from RELIAS in 2021 disclosed a national turnover rate for DSPs at 42.8%, with some states experiencing an even more concerning 64.8% turnover (Galindo, 2022). High turnover rates have a direct negative impact on individuals served due to instability and lack of emotional connections (Spreat, S. 2020). The average cost of replacement for DSPs can be between \$2413 and \$5200, meaning that it is a large cost to an organization when turnover is high (Blitz, 2024).

Understanding the intricate dynamics of turnover and identifying concrete strategies for employee support is crucial. This paper emphasizes the pivotal role of education and upskilling as critical components in addressing turnover and enhancing retention. Recognizing employees,

especially DSPs, as valuable assets, intentional investment in their education and continuous development becomes a strategic imperative.

Education acts as a cornerstone for empowerment, enabling DSPs to navigate evolving challenges with resilience and adaptability. It provides a foundation for professional growth and enhances the overall skill set of the workforce. Upskilling, in parallel, equips DSPs with the tools and knowledge necessary to excel in their roles, fostering increased confidence and job satisfaction. The deliberate focus on education and upskilling is not just an investment in the workforce's competence but also a proactive strategy to enhance retention. Retaining a skilled and educated workforce ensures a consistent standard of care, as DSPs bring enhanced expertise and insights to their roles. Furthermore, ongoing education serves as a preventive measure against burnout by signaling a commitment to the professional development and well-being of the employees.

In essence, the exploration of turnover and retention underscores the critical role of education and upskilling in creating a robust and sustainable workforce. By prioritizing continuous learning, organizations not only empower their employees but also fortify their ability to deliver high-quality care. This strategic approach serves as a catalyst for enhanced retention, ultimately contributing to a more stable and fulfilling future in the Human Services sector.

It is important to note that the role of direct care professionals varies in name. There is currently no set global identified name for the role that caregivers provide to individuals served. This caregiving role can be labeled in many ways: Direct Support Professional (DSP), Direct Care Counselor, Direct Care Provider, or Direct Support Staff. All these names are used to identify the same care-providing role. This role includes working directly with individuals who have intellectual or developmental disabilities, helping them reach their full potential, achieved by day-to-day care, advocacy, and all-around support for living a fulfilling life.

This article identifies the vital role DSPs play in the lives of individuals served and the importance of retention of such employment. It addresses the history of retention of direct care staff and the overall global issues whilst simultaneously addressing the importance of support for direct care staff through furthering education, training, and career growth opportunities. It also addresses identified methods of improved retention, such as furthering education and career growth opportunities, dedicated staff members for retention, and staff emotional well-being being highlighted as detrimental.

DSPs play a critical role in supporting individuals with disabilities to achieve and maintain independence, assisting with aspects of daily living such as personal care, household chores and errands, transportation, and social activities. The goal of the DSP is not to do everything for the individual they support but rather to empower them to develop skills, make choices, and participate as actively in their community as they wish. Assisting in personal care can be assisting with toileting or bathing, but also ensuring their hygiene in general is healthy. Household chores and errands are another aspect of the day-to-day support, as they provide guidance, instruction, and hands-on assistance as needed, helping to develop skills and confidence to perform tasks independently. DSPs may accompany individuals on errands,

offering support with navigating, decision-making, driving, and even making changes sometimes. DSPs often also provide medication administration and support, ensuring individuals take their prescribed medicals safely and as directed, monitoring for any adverse reactions or side effects, and promoting the individual's health and well-being. Through their encouragement and positive reinforcement, DSPs empower individuals to lead more independent and fulfilling lives, fostering a sense of autonomy and dignity within the home and community.

History

The retention of DSPs is a global issue that is prevalent not only in the United States but worldwide (Brandt, 2017). Several reasons for labor shortages with DSPs, the main reasons being the typically low pay associated with the role, alongside the challenges that can arise from working with clients with behavioral health difficulties. That is why retention creativity is empirical in keeping DSPs employed, not only employed but also thriving in their role. It can be clearly identified that if people enjoy their jobs, they are more likely to stay within their roles/ the organization. On average, DSPs in Pennsylvania earn \$16 per hour, and the nationwide average is \$16 per hour (ZipRecruiter, 2024). This is recorded to be over \$10 less per hour than the living wage; research from MIT has shown that a living wage in the US is \$25.02 per hour (Glasmerier, 2023).

DSP turnover negatively impacts individuals served due to a change of routine and inconsistency of staff, which limits the connections and boundaries built between individuals and staff members. Direct care staff turnover varies from as low as 25% to over 50% per year; when offering context, the average turnover of accounts sits at 8% per year (Spreat, McHale, & Walker, 2017), therefore clearly demonstrating the turnover within the role is higher than average turnover. It can even be argued that due to the longevity of the labor shortage, identified first as a crisis in 2012 (President's Committee, 2017), this issue has been continuing for now 12 years, and it can no longer be identified as a crisis. Addressing specifically the workforce crisis in the intellectual disability field has been ongoing for 30 years (Spreat, 2022). Data demonstrates that since 2014, the supply of DSPs has consistently lagged 10% below the demand (Spreat, 2022). As stated previously, all staff shortages can directly negatively impact the experiences of individuals served through program quality and access to additional disposable income for projects due to the cost of recruitment and training to replace staff (Spreat, 2020).

DSPs are integral to the broader landscape of healthcare and population health, and recognizing them as healthcare professions allows us to view their roles in a similar light to nurses and others. In a post-COVID society, it is more prevalent for employees to increase their work-life balance and have a role that they enjoy. In an ever-changing job market, it is important to recognize role shortcomings to accurately provide staff support. The COVID-19 pandemic caused society to rely heavily on healthcare professionals. Healthcare professionals have expressed the difficulties of their roles for a long time; however, they felt they may finally get the recognition they deserved post-pandemic. Healthcare professionals were looking for pay raises, better benefits, and more work appreciation. Once the pandemic was over, healthcare professionals were expected to return to work as normal, with limited additional support advocated throughout the pandemic. Healthcare professionals have also not been recognized for

the trauma caused by the pandemic, for example, the increase in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to pressure directly from the patients and deaths caused by COVID-19 (Yoon, H. et al., 2023).

It can be identified that there is an increase in demand for direct care staff. This is due to a myriad of reasons; however, the main motive is that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are living longer periods and, therefore, need support for longer periods (Dolan, Lane, Hillis, & Delanty, 2019, Cited by Dr. Spreat). There has been an approximate increase in individuals with intellectual disabilities are now being supported in a residential setting 162% (Lulinski, Jorwic, Tanis, & Braddock, 2018, Cited by Dr. Spreat), demonstrating a clear increase in populations that need to be served. Thus, this demonstrates a clear rise in the need for direct care staff and shines a brighter light on the focus on retention. Retention of direct care staff is vital to continue to offer paramount care to individual-served staff who are overworked to fill in overtime hours can be exhausted, which can lead to reduced care for individuals. All individuals deserve the best care available, and staff shortages cannot prevent this from occurring. This section identifies the typical reasons for staff shortages of direct care staff that can be identified.

Low Pay

It is well documented that the role of direct care staff is low-paid (Spreat, 2020). This is argued to be due to many varying factors; for example, society overall does not seem to value or care for our vulnerable populations; this is not only seen with individuals with behavioral health difficulties but also with elderly and disabled populations. The direct care staff industry is also female-dominated, typically lower paid, as it is deemed not as valuable as profit-making entities, such as teachers and childcare industries. Lower pay and hard-working conditions are two of the main elements that will cause employees to leave their roles. The non-profit industry cannot keep up with the wages offered by for-profit companies. For-profit organizations can set their own wages and elevate wages based on market competitors.

It can be identified that there is a pattern of systematic underfunding of social services (Harvey & Tropman, 2010, Cited by Dr. Spreat), which has a direct correlation to the lack of significant pay increases for direct care staff. Due to the high turnover rates and competitive job markets, the cost of staff is often a high output for intellectual disability providers, who are typically spending between 75% and 85% of their entire budget on staffing costs (Dr. Spreat, p. 3, 2022), meaning that there is little room left in the budget in order to entice new hire direct care staff in the competitive market that is seen today. It is understood that when there are stagnant pay increases in an ever-inflating market which will eventually lead to staff shortages (Pettenger, 2017, Cited by Dr. Spreat). Therefore, we can confirm that low pay rates are key factors when discussing labor shortages for direct care staff.

Difficulties of the Role

Individuals often need assistance with a range of tasks throughout their day, such as regular household chores, getting ready for the day, going out and social activities, being active

members of community organizations, and, lastly, running everyday errands. The role of direct care staff can be identified as a difficult job. This is due to the role, as it can take an emotional toll on staff and a physical toll. The role requires patience, compassion, and understanding, which can be hard to provide consistently when regulating one's own emotions and personal life; this also includes maintaining professional relationships with clients and their friends and family. The role can be physically difficult with behavioral challenges from individuals served; behaviors can include aggression, which must be diffused, which leads to emotional and physical reactions that require patient and compassionate staff. Individuals served may also need physical assistance, for example, getting in and out of bed or wheelchair support; this means to succeed in the role of DSP, staff must be able to physically aid clients.

The demanding nature of the role includes physical tasks and emotional and interpersonal challenges. Providing consistent support requires navigating complex emotions, maintaining professional boundaries, and diffusing potential crisis situations with empathy and patience. Moreover, the physical demands of assisting individuals with various daily activities, from personal care to mobility support, can be physically taxing. Balancing these responsibilities while prioritizing the well-being of those being served can undoubtedly take a toll on the mental and physical health of DSPs. Thus, the multifaceted nature of the role underscores the significance of the challenges and sacrifices involved in providing compassionate care to the individuals served.

A Love for the Job

Although it is documented that the role of a DSP can be challenging, many of the people who provide the care as DSPs have true care of the role and seek enjoyment from it. The bonds formed are important to DSPs as they watch individuals served to grow and gain more independence, which is often fulfilling for DSPs as making a positive impact on the lives of the individuals they support. Furthermore, the camaraderie among DSPs and the sense of purpose derived from services others contribute to job satisfaction. DSPs often have a deep understanding of their clients and support their goals and achievements. These positive factors can outweigh the difficulties that come with the role. DSPs often work closely with individuals and families and, therefore, bond with clients and have genuine care for their growth and well-being.

Positive Turnover

Although this paper has discussed the issues with high turnover, not all turnover is negative. For example, upskilling employees, providing them the opportunity for career growth, and seeing employees transition into higher paying roles are causes for turnover; however, this turnover is not due to dissatisfaction but rather for personal growth, career advancement, or other positive reasons. When investing in employees' personal and professional growth through extraordinary benefits such as educational opportunities and career development programs, staff are incentivized to grow within the organization. Staff are sometimes seen to be more likely to stay within the organization when they feel supported and their growth is supported. Addressing the short-term, this may not be seen as a benefit in the field as it still counts as turnover; however, it positively benefits the overall field. For example, having more educated and better-trained staff

in the field can increase the quality of care for individuals served overall. Thus, overall, a short-term dip in retention can benefit the overall field/ industry to better serve individuals. Additionally, this turnover can benefit organizations by bringing fresh perspectives and maintaining a motivated workforce committed to providing high-quality care. Overall, DSPs' dedication, passion, and commitment to enhancing the lives of those supported make their profession not just a job but a fulfilling vocation.

Current Data/Discussion

The Woods System of Care (WSC) has recognized the turnover of direct care staff, both industry-wide and within the organization. Therefore, in pursuit of continuous improvement, WSC is committed to pioneering approaches that must be taken to improve this gap and overall offer the best care possible to all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as the underlying factor is that these are the people who will suffer from staff shortages.

The three main ways the WSC has combated the staff shortages of direct care staff are; offering exceptional benefits, a dedicated team to helping promote and aid career and educational opportunities through a DSP certification, and a committed retention and employee engagement strategist who checks in with all staff once they have started in their roles to determine their satisfaction and address any concerns.

As has previously been identified, furthering education and training is vital when retaining staff and supporting their personal and professional career growth. WSC takes this initiative of great importance and creates more training targeted toward direct care staff. The following sections will provide an overview of this program and show how these approaches are improving retention within WSC.

DSP Certification

The DSP Certification was designed by a WSC affiliate to offer educational advantages for DSPs, to offer a certified course in which staff gain more skills in areas such as communication and behavioral health care, and at the end of the certification, they receive their certification and a pay rise. The certified DSPs are also considered first for promotions (if they so wish) due to their experience and expertise. This certification is designed to encourage retention with DSP staff to help aid career growth and long-term careers within the industry, supporting career growth and professional development is identified to support retention.

Alongside the pay increase and improved promotion, the WSC is partnered with the University of Arizona to offer four college course credits for completing the DSP certification. These credits can be used toward a college course at the University, which thus offers a great head start into a college course. This promotes the support staff have throughout WCS to grow educationally; staff can also request support for applications to colleges and student financial aid. Offering staff support for professional growth and educational development shows staff that their personal evolution is valued within WSC, which causes staff to stay within WSC as the foundation cares for staff.

The piloted certification is opened through an application process and is open to all DSPs who qualify. Those who qualify are invited to complete the course. The course is built out of four quarters, each of which includes additional training hours to complete online, alongside an in-person component of a workshop to offer DSPs a chance to share and discuss experiences with the course. DSPs are supported throughout the course, with office hours available to reach out to trainers, access to technology, and time to complete course training. Upon completion of the first six months of the course, DSPs are provided with 50% of their agreed pay increase, and after the completion of all course content, the remaining 50% is provided. Due to the pilot's success, WSC is expanding the DSP certification to offer more DSPs career growth opportunities. The DSP certification aims to roll it out nationally to provide a national accreditation for DSPs recognized nationally and further globally (Wilson-Fall et al., 2023).

The retention numbers of staff who have completed the course demonstrate its success. All staff who successfully completed the course are still employed as direct care staff within WSC, meaning there is a 100% retention rate for staff who complete the course almost a year after completion. Due to the success of this course, the pilot study has been cleared to start at another affiliate. The certification has been piloted at a WSC affiliate, Allies, Inc., and has seen great success. Upon the pilot's success, Allies are continuing the certification as it stands, alongside the anticipation of being launched at another New Jersey affiliate of WSC, Legacy Treatment Services. Whilst launching an International DSP certification with DSP candidates in Liberia and Nigeria, the course will vary slightly as it is designed to be an introduction to the role of a DSP.

Exceptional Benefits

WSC offers exceptional benefits to all staff, which are of crucial importance to minimum wage staff. The top benefits include access for staff and staff families to the medical center, partnerships with colleges to offer tuition discounts, tuition reimbursement plans, sick leave, and vacation time. Benefits are set aside for an organization in a competitive market, which is why exceptional benefits are necessary.

Alongside market competition, exceptional benefits help staff to feel appreciated in other ways than pay. Direct care staff pay is predetermined by government support, meaning that benefits set an organization aside from market competitors. If care providers choose to offer increased pay, it comes directly from their budgets, which pulls money away from other programs.

Demonstrating to staff that they are valued as individuals is often greatly appreciated by staff. Staff want to feel recognized and appreciated for their efforts. Supporting staff in their life beyond the organization, for example, their personal and professional growth, helps staff feel valued by their organization. WSC demonstrates this to staff by offering excellent educational benefits through tuition assistance programs, student loan repayment programs, onsite college classes, and support with college applications and loan applications. All educational support not only supports employees outside the organization in their personal development but also provides opportunities for professional development. Staff obtaining higher education allows staff to put themselves forward for further roles, which typically offer higher compensation.

With staff putting themselves forward for promotions this also keeps employees within the organization, thus providing a retention cycle.

Stay Interviews

Retention rates and employee engagement are interchangeable terms. It can be determined that post COVID-19 pandemic the workforce is seeming to feel that they need more care from organizations and be respected in the personal as well as professional. As previously identified the COVID-19 pandemic offered the workforce perspective on their roles and provided feedback about the importance of increased support in the workplace. This is a direct correlation to the approach WSC is taking for staff retention and support.

In addressing the challenges of the direct care industry, where compensation can be lower and roles demanding, organizations must adopt innovative strategies to retain their staff. Given the current competitive market, organizations need to explore unconventional approaches to both attract and keep direct care professionals. While many organizations rely on conventional retention methods such as medical benefits, paid time off, sick pay, and perks like gym memberships, these approaches may not always stand out to prospective hires who have encountered them repeatedly. Considering the demanding nature of the job, potential employees are often drawn to positions in private companies that offer more enticing compensation packages.

There are multiple ways in which higher retention programs are being practiced and piloted at WSC, and the DSP certification has proven valuable in improving staff retention rates. However, the DSP Certification only reaches select employees within the workforce; while the dream is one day widespread the DSP Certification, we have to continue searching for non-standard ideas to increase retention. WSC has implemented scheduled check-ins with DSPs, also referred to as retention interviews or stay interviews, and is currently a tool being used to understand how DSPs are feeling in every aspect of their new hire experience and overall role. Stay interviews are valuable for retention as they help identify factors that contribute to employee satisfaction and commitment and proactively address concerns, which leads to creating a work environment that fosters loyalty (Finnegan, 2018). These interviews provide opportunities for the organization to gain insights into their staff's needs and aspirations and help to understand what motivates and satisfies employees, which then allows the organization to tailor retention strategies to what is meaningful to their workforce. Furthermore, stay interviews help identify potential issues or dissatisfaction before they escalate into a turnover. By regularly checking in with employees, the organization can address concerns promptly, thereby preventing disengagement and turnover. Engaging employees at this level demonstrates that their opinions and perspectives are values, which can increase morale, motivation, and commitment to the organization's mission (Finnegan, 2018).

The Stay Interviews that are conducted at WSC for DSPs newly hired through the staffing affiliate, Aurora Staffing, are conducted periodically from the start of employment through to six months of employment. The check-ins have received high praise from staff, with many staff stating that they appreciate the caring factor of the company. Many have expressed that they

have not experienced this type of outreach at previous employment locations. Staff often express gratitude in response to questions about how they are doing at the periodic check-ins. This demonstrates staff feel valued as people and that they feel the level of care shown. In addition to stay-interviews, surveys are used to gather feedback on how the organization has performed with orientation and on-the-job training; these surveys help identify gaps and improvements to be addressed with training. This also provides newly hired employees with the chance to understand any confusion they may have experienced regarding training, on-the-job training, or any clarification they may need. The survey is the first introduction to the retention care shown for staff, which comes along with a welcome from the retention and employee engagement professionals with WCS. The retention and employee engagement professionals set the tone for newly hired employees by providing them with a direct contact person and serving as a liaison for their professional network. The feedback from the surveys and the stay interviews is passed along to leadership, and if needed, change recommendations are discussed, strategized, and implemented. A large part of WCS's stance on leadership is showing staff that they are cared for; this appears to be valued by staff, and the extra personalized touch is beneficial. By gathering feedback directly from employees, WCS is taking a personalized approach to be more effective in retaining top talent compared to one-size-fits-all retention initiatives (Finnegan, 2018). Overall, stay interviews have been a productive tool for WCS to enhance employee retention, improve engagement, and foster a positive work culture.

Conclusion

Overall, it is evident that there is a labor shortage still occurring in the direct care industry, and care providers must be innovative in direct care staff retention and recruitment. As it has been identified, this is not only a national issue affecting the US but also a global labor shortage. This largest success can be identified with additional support to staff through personal and professional growth, seen in offering further education and training alongside positive career growth opportunities. By understanding the root causes of turnover, WCS has implemented targeted strategies to effectively address this challenge and create a more stable and fulfilling work environment for DSPs. Education and upskilling emerge as central pillars in this endeavor, empowering DSPs with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in their roles. Additionally, initiatives such as exceptional benefits packages and stay interviews demonstrate a personalized approach to retention, fostering engagement and loyalty among DSPs. Moving forward, it is imperative for organizations to continue innovating and adapting to meet the evolving needs of DSPs, ensuring the delivery of high-quality care and support to those served.

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