Original Research

An in-depth examination into pharmacy technician worklife through an organizational behavior framework

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Abstract

Background: Pharmacy technicians are a vital part of the health care workforce. Little is known about perceptions of their own work environment that would engender more effective recruitment, retention, and management strategies by pharmacists and employers.
Objectives: The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of certified pharmacy technician worklife. Specific objectives included the identification of themes of worklife phenomena to assist with the development of appropriate responses by other pharmacy stakeholders and to ascertain the contribution of various factors engendering or discouraging career commitment of pharmacy technicians.
Methods: Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with a convenience sample of pharmacy technicians in one U.S. state, who varied by their work settings and level of experience. The interview guide and corresponding participant responses were framed from around an organizational cultural basis rooted in organizational behavior theory. Notes from the interviews were analyzed thematically using directed content analysis.
Results: Four primary themes emerged, including: *career impetus*, *job responsibilities*, *quality of work life*, and *equitable partnership*. The data revealed pharmacy technicians' need for self-actualization and recognition of the value they bring to the organization. The participants identified primary responsibilities that contribute to their sense of worth and those that if not managed adequately potentially detract from their well-being and effectiveness. Findings in regard to rate of pay corroborate previous work on wages as both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivator. Pharmacy technicians seek equity among each other (their peers) and in a mutually beneficial relationship with their employing organization.
Conclusions: This study provides the impetus for interventions and further study that should serve to enhance pharmacy technician effectiveness, quality of work life, and longevity in an emerging profession.
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Introduction

Economic, logistical, and legislative forces have ushered in expanded scopes of practice for pharmacists,[1] while the call for further involvement in public health promises to grow pharmacy's place in preventive as well as curative care.[2] Coupled with a shortage of primary care providers, this creates momentous opportunities for the profession. However, the confluence of

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these events also presents its challenges. It has been over a decade since Maine expressed concern regarding the profession's ability to continue its evolution toward more patient-centered practice, notwithstanding other barriers, but additionally for having an adequate number of properly trained personnel with the right mix of skills and attitudes to deliver on its stated mission of medication therapy management.[3]

A number of studies have evaluated pharmacists' readiness to provide cognitive services,[4] their propensity to initiate communication,[5] entrepreneurial orientation,[6] and likelihood of changing practice.[7] Organizational culture plays a prominent role in these and related phenomena. Organizational culture has been defined as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough … to be taught to new members…"[8] A pharmacy organization's culture ultimately affects patient safety and outcomes by projection of an ethos for what is valued by leadership and internal and external clients.[9] Likewise, organizational culture and the prevailing climate affect the quality of worklife of personnel, thus impacting job satisfaction, turnover, role stress, morale, and citizenship behaviors.[10] These job-related factors have been investigated at least somewhat thoroughly among pharmacists.[11] It has been argued that for the pharmacy profession to seize opportunities being afforded it and truly fill voids in patient wellness, pharmacy technicians likewise must be included in efforts to raise standards of pharmacy care.[12,13] Likewise, studies evaluating organizational culture and its inherent job-related outcomes in pharmacy, should include pharmacy technicians.

To date, little has been done to assess pharmacy technicians' job-related outcomes. Anecdotal evidence suggests pharmacy technician turnover to be relatively high, particularly for the amount of stress that they might endure and in the face of relatively low salaries. Given recent wage estimates of approximately $15/h in the U.S.,[14] technicians with experience and an adequate mix of skills might find other jobs paying at least that much, thus making exit from the field a very realistic prospect. Professionalization of an occupation can further its advancement and also promote more positive job-related outcomes, owing in part to professional organizations protecting its members and to the creation of a greater sense of camaraderie, thus providing a foundation for career commitment.[15] While the merits of technician certification have

been debated, more employers and more U.S. states now require certification, often through the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB) process. Certification is one indicator of technician professionalization. As such, a study of certified technician quality of worklife revealed several salient findings.[16] Certified technicians reported moderate job satisfaction; i.e., lower than that of pharmacists and other white collar professionals but higher than that of many skilled laborers. They reported moderate levels of stress, role clarity, role conflict, coworker and supervisor support. Likewise, their career commitment was relatively high considering two deleterious factors at play. Specifically, certified technicians reported low perceived employer support and high future uncertainty. Just over ½ agreed that given the opportunity, they would choose the same career. It was inferred that technicians sometimes see themselves as valued by those around them, but see themselves in part as replaceable cogs in a large wheel.

These job attitudes were further confirmed by a study on certified pharmacy technicians' job turnover intentions.[17] The most frequently cited reasons for intention to leave included lack of advancement opportunity, poor salary, insufficient staffing, and high stress levels. On the other hand, the most frequently cited reasons for intending to remain with the current employer included flexible work schedule, good benefits, and relationships with coworkers. Taken further, a multivariate analysis revealed perceived employer support as a contributor to a certified pharmacy technician's commitment to the organization and to their intent to remain with the current employer. Likewise, their hourly wage and their commitment to the profession predicted their commitment to the employing organization. Additional sub-analyses found three tiers of actual, reported wages regarding future employment intentions: one that has technicians looking for another job primarily because of low wages, a second that has them neither looking for another job nor engendering loyalty in the current job, and a third that engenders loyalty to the current employer.[17] The difference between the wages among these three tiers was only approximately $1.50/h at the time of the study.

These issues raise questions about the management of pharmacy technicians and how they are viewed by pharmacy organizations. While technicians have indicated satisfaction with pharmacist supervisor support, another study found inconsistent at best, and often totally lacking awareness of