

HOW TO SURVIVE —AND THRIVE—IN A HISTORIC WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

*7 strategies for redefining
your lab workforce*



**FEATURING INSIGHTS
AND INNOVATIONS
FROM:**

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The national workforce shortage has hit healthcare hard. And laboratories are experiencing it right along with nursing and primary care. I've seen lab directors forced into survival mode, scrambling to fill empty positions and figure out how to do more with less.

With a current estimated shortage of 20,000–25,000 lab professionals in the US and Canada,¹ lab directors are telling me they're prioritizing quick and easy tests and outsourcing the complex tests that grow revenue. Even worse, without enough labor and capital, labs are challenged to innovate new ways to build value.

But this scarcity mindset is a self-fulfilling spiral down to outsourcing, prioritizing simpler tests that earn low fees, and ultimately irrelevance—and will perpetuate labs as cost centers rather than revenue drivers.

"Instead, what's needed is a growth mind-set, a shift in thinking from plugging holes to using the shortage to drive reinvention of how you recruit, train, and retain lab staff."

Because, today, reinvention is less about technology and more about people and process.

With an aging population and a greater reliance on diagnosis via testing—coupled with the aging laboratory workforce and a shortage of lab tech training programs—the workforce shortage is not going away anytime soon. Yet you don't need to fix the staffing problem on a national level—you just need to do it better than other labs. That means redefining how you recruit, rethinking how you train and develop career paths, and creating a workplace environment that is welcoming and supportive.

1. ADVOCATE FOR HIGHER SALARIES

Ideally, we should think about advocating for increasing salary ranges. In order to do that, you'll need to make a case to the C-suite, which I think we're in a better position to do today than we have been at any time in the last 10-plus years.

Throughout COVID, a lot of laboratories came into the space.² Independent labs are not typically governed by hospital-based pay scales, so they may be able to pay higher wages, which can push up average lab salaries.

In my experience, labs are competing for graduates with science degrees, with their choice of jobs in biotech and pharma, and the higher pay that comes with them. The reality is that you can't attract talent without competitive pay.

2. BUILD CAREER PATHS FOR YOUR STAFF

Medical technicians may be staying at the same level, doing the same job, for 10 or more years. It's better to give them a chance to feel like they're moving forward in their careers rather than stagnating.

"Creating paths for career advancement can attract and retain workers—and create

stability for your lab by reducing turnover."

Consider building in med tech levels 1, 2, and 3, followed by lead med tech and managerial roles. Find small ways to give your team ownership like offering specialization training or assigning someone as the key operator for a certain piece of equipment.

3. BROADEN YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON CERTIFICATION

During COVID, thousands of technicians came into the field, many without standard certifications. With a few months of training, however, many of them were able to meet CLIA standards to conduct a range of testing. Yet most hospitals still have job requirements that disqualify them, because they lack a degree in medical laboratory science or a specific certification. Given that the US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 13% average increase in need of medical laboratory technologists and technicians nationwide by 2026, it may be time to reconsider those policies.³

Hospitals should be saying, "This person meets the federal standards, has worked in a CLIA laboratory, and I can coach them up and train them." As a lab director, rewrite your job descriptions. Maybe some

qualification is nice to have but look at the actual state and country requirements and only include what's required. Then once they're on board, offer training. While it's better to have someone who can hit the ground running, we don't have that luxury anymore.

4. MEDICAL LAB TECHS ARE YOUR SECRET WEAPON

Senior staff may view generalist medical lab technicians (MLTs) and medical lab assistants (MLAs) as taking work away at a lower cost. But here's where labs need to reframe their thinking.

MLTs and MLAs relieve your team of running automated machines, freeing up senior staff to focus on more complex testing—and even innovation in testing and services.

Labs need to embrace this opportunity to stratify jobs so that every team member is working at the top of their license. At the same time, labs can continue running high-complexity tests in-house.

Labs can also train up less experienced generalist workers with mentor-mentee programs. Or encourage these workers to complete degrees or add certifications by providing some funding or flexible scheduling to accommodate the coursework. Career growth at all levels will

bolster your team and keep them in your lab.

5. SHOW APPRECIATION (AND NOT JUST ONE WEEK A YEAR)

According to a 2022 poll of lab workers conducted by Lighthouse, 36% described themselves as moderately or extremely unsatisfied in their current role.⁴ Even when labs cannot raise salaries, creating a culture of appreciation will help attract and retain talent.

The survey found that new lab techs reported having the lowest morale. When we explored why, they said they were made to feel inadequate, felt scared to ask questions and belittled by senior staffers. I've seen people being very possessive in a lot of laboratories, with an attitude like 'this is my area, that's my equipment, don't

touch my stuff.’ If staffers are scaring off new grads or excluding them, it’s not going to help you retain people. Instead, build an inclusive community without silos or territoriality.

6. GIVE TRAVELING TECHS SOME LOVE

In my experience, traveling and temporary technicians, which probably make up about 10% to 15% of the lab workforce, can generate some resentment among permanent lab workers due to higher wages and easier schedules. That can lead staff to ignore the temp techs, not treat them as part of the team, or intentionally exclude them.

That is a short-sighted response. Many travelers ultimately want to land somewhere permanent and are looking for

a lab that they enjoy working in. So, creating a more welcoming atmosphere, including them, teaching them, and treating them as a valued member of the lab, goes a long way.

7. ADVOCATE FOR FLEXIBILITY AND REMOTE WORK

During the public health emergency, the FDA relaxed some regulations, and people were permitted to work remotely. Allowing for this flexibility means you have access to a bigger labor pool and can offer a better work-life balance for workers. Yet some of these allowances are being rolled back, and workers are simply moving on to organizations that do offer flexibility. Lab directors can help to advocate for updating the CLIA regulations to allow for remote work.

Labs can also become more creative with scheduling, so workers are not locked into rigid shifts. Look at doing 4-day shifts or allow workers to choose their shifts—an offer that can be more attractive than even a raise.

In short, shifting your mindset to a people-first approach to business can help bring in a stable workforce in your lab. Then you can focus on freeing up senior

staff to focus on more complex testing and new revenue streams — these innovations may help your lab move from a cost center to a valued revenue creator for health systems.

Jon Harol is the Founder and President of Lighthouse Lab Services, which specializes in the buildout and staffing of CLIA Labs nationwide. With more than 20 years of experience in the clinical lab industry, Jon spends each day advocating for the value of clinical labs while also seeking new and more efficient ways for Lighthouse's medical lab clients to bring clinical value to the healthcare ecosystem. His goal is to bring the lab out of the shadows and have it recognized as the backbone of the healthcare system.

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