

Unit Six

Career planning and development for health care assistants from a general practice employer's perspective

Key messages

Reading this unit will:

- explain how the practice can support health care assistants (HCAs) to develop and progress their career
- explain the benefits for the practice in supporting HCAs to develop their career
- describe the career pathways that are available to HCAs.

You will want to enable the HCAs you employ to progress in their careers. They will need all the support and encouragement you can give them, especially if they are new to the role or your practice, or lack confidence in their ability and potential. They will appreciate an environment and culture where career development is welcomed and enabled. As a general practice employer, put aside any fears that once trained, staff will move on. If HCAs are happy and fulfilled working in a practice, they will be likely to remain.¹ If they do move on, they will tell their friends and colleagues what a fantastic start the practice has given them, and others will be keen to come and work there. If HCAs leave to undertake nurse or allied health professional training, practices should try to keep in touch and support them through their course, giving them access to their resources, such as the practice library, so that they are likely to return when they qualify.

Practices should think about succession planning, in order to minimise disruption if key staff leave the practice team. The effort put into succession planning will help HCAs and other staff to progress as they take on further roles and responsibilities along their career pathway. If people do leave or move onto more senior positions within the practice, the focus should be placed on staff at the more junior levels to see how they can be supported or reviewed for the possibility of moving them up to fill a more senior post. If the practice is in touch with its staff's career aspirations, it can help them to progress and, in turn, boost their job satisfaction and motivation.

The NHS Career Framework

The NHS Career Framework has nine key elements, which are listed in the table overleaf.² This should help explain how the HCA post fits in with the hierarchy of NHS careers. The *Skills Escalator* strategy puts the NHS Career Framework into context, highlighting the entry points for working in the NHS, and the variety of career and training step-on and step-off points. It is a complementary strategy that aims to give everyone working within the NHS the opportunity to progress in their careers, contributing to new ways of working and delivering services. It is also aimed at opening up opportunities for people outside the NHS workforce to see where they might fit.^{3,4}

The case study in the example below explains how Linda started as a receptionist at Level 1 before becoming an HCA at the support worker level. She then attained her primary HCA qualification and NVQ Level 3, progressing to the level of senior HCA. She is now studying to be a registered nurse, after which she will leapfrog to Level 5 when she starts out as a post-registration nurse.

Example: Career mentors

Linda worked for the Willow Tree practice as a member of the reception team when the PCT established the practice in an inner-city area of her town. She was already participating in a local career development initiative for administrative staff and HCAs, whereby she had been allocated a career mentor. She discussed her aspirations for moving into a caring role with her mentor, as she felt really drawn to working more closely with patients than her reception and clerical role allowed, but wasn't sure if she was good enough. They discussed Linda's career plans and how a move to an HCA post might slot into the greater scheme of things. Linda applied for the next part-time HCA post in the practice and got the job against stiff competition from other applicants (her mentor had encouraged her to go for interview skills training). Her practice manager was pleased to allow Linda to combine her new HCA role with half-time clerical work and replaced the 'other half' of Linda with a new receptionist. The practice arranged her induction to her HCA role to take account of the fact that she knew the practice team well, but was inexperienced at care work. She continued to meet with her career mentor for a further 6 months.

Examples of evaluation that a health care assistant might undertake

Key elements of the NHS Career Framework

Level 9. More senior staff: with ultimate responsibility for clinical caseload decision making and full on call accountability.

Level 8. Consultant practitioners: staff working at a very high level of clinical expertise and/or have responsibility for planning of services.

Level 7. Advanced practitioners: experienced clinical professionals with skills and knowledge to a very high standard.

Level 6. Senior practitioners/specialist practitioners: staff with a higher degree of autonomy and responsibility than 'practitioners'.

Level 5. Practitioners: most frequently registered practitioners in their first and second post-registration/professional qualification jobs.

Level 4. Assistant practitioners/associate practitioners: delivering protocol based clinical care under the direction and supervision of a state registered practitioner. Probably studying for, or attained, a foundation degree, Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) higher or Higher National Diploma (HND).

Level 3. Senior HCAs/technicians: have a higher level of responsibility than a support worker. Probably studying for, or attained, NVQ Level 3 or Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

Level 2. Support workers: frequently have job title health care assistant or healthcare technician. Probably studying for, or attained, NVQ Level 2.

Level 1. Initial entry-level jobs: such as domestic assistants or cadets requiring very little formal education or previous knowledge, skills or experience in delivering or supporting the delivery of healthcare.

To review the career pathways that are available to staff, look on the *Skills for Health* website (www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/careerframework/tools/php). This career tool can be used in a practice for succession planning or to check a staffing profile. It can also be used to see what career options are available to members of staff. A senior HCA has several career options at Level 4 if they continue to develop their competence, for example: an assistant practitioner in radiography or nursing, or a community care assistant.

Support HCAs' learning needs as an integral part of their career progression

Unit 4: Personal and professional development of HCAs covers how HCAs can be helped to identify their learning needs (see [Tool – Drafting your personal development plan](#)). Review how attractive your practice is to work in (see [Tool – How attractive is the practice as an employer?](#)). HCAs should be introduced to the opportunities that exist in their practice to expand and develop their roles at team development away days, team information meetings (see [Tool – Running a team meeting](#), for assistance on team culture), or their annual appraisal or performance reviews (turn to **Unit 4: Personal and professional development** for more background on best practice in appraisal).

Practice plans should be consulted on and shared, and HCAs and other staff should be kept well informed about ideas for new skill-mix arrangements or revised clinical protocols that increase their responsibilities. Learning needs and career development can then be matched to the practice's service and development needs. The subsequently costs of linked training can be incorporated into the practice's business plan.

A number of systems should already be running in a practice to underpin career progression for HCAs and other staff, and keep them motivated are. These systems include:

- personally tailored induction programme with opportunities to find out how each of the other team members work and what their roles entail (see **Unit 2: Employment** and **Unit 5: Education and training**)
- personally tailored development programmes (see **Unit 4: Personal and professional development** and **Unit 5: Education and training**)
- good team working (see **Unit 7: Integration of the HCA into the general practice workforce**)
- regular appraisal and reflection on development (see **Unit 4: Personal and professional development** and **Unit 5: Education and training**)
- facilitation of the clinical supervision process (see **Unit 5: Education and training** and **Unit 7: Integration of the HCA into the general practice workforce**)
- facilitation of HCA peer-group meetings with HCAs from other practices to discuss issues and share good practice (see **Unit 5: Education and training**)
- updating of clinical and non-clinical knowledge and skills so that the HCA and other team members are always moving forward in their competency, and gain transferable skills that will help their career progression (see **Unit 3: Competences**)
- mentors for HCAs and other staff (see **Unit 5: Education and training**). Would the GPs and practice manager or attached nurses and allied health professionals be prepared to act as mentor to the nursing staff, including the HCAs? Could the local university or college nominate some of their staff to act as mentors to the practice staff?
- shadowing opportunities, eg allowing your HCA to spend a day with the district nurse, health visitor, community midwife or podiatrist during their induction period or later on
- encouraging HCAs to take on an educational and supportive role for other HCAs as they become more senior
- facilitation of the socialisation of the HCA into the health service culture.

Signposting HCAs to career support resources

General practice employers should find out what career support resources there are that need to be highlighted to HCA staff. The information section at the end of this Unit is a good place to start (see [Tool – Careers support information for HCAs](#)). Otherwise local career support experts in the NHS should be contacted, or those in community initiatives or at local colleges or universities. The example below describes one practice's approach to providing support for training and career progression as a component part of their employment contract with an HCA.

Example: A good example of a practice supporting the training and development of an HCA as an integral part of their employment contract

The Woodlands practice in Kent values its HCA workforce as an integral part of the practice nursing team. Their planning to address the demand for care in relation to chronic disease justified the appointment of an HCA with a revised skill mix in the nursing team. The newly appointed HCA was appointed with the expectation that they will gain an NVQ Level 3 in Care by a specified date in the future.⁵

General practice employers can direct their HCAs and other staff to access the NHS learning and development telephone service. This resource offers impartial advice to current NHS staff on ways to learn, develop or get the qualifications they need to make the most of their potential. They can use the service to:

- *explore their learning and development needs*
- *receive general careers advice*
- *talk through a range of learning and career options*
- *get help to make realistic, informed decisions about their learning and development*
- *find out where to go for funding and learning support.*⁶

Set out a study leave policy for HCAs

General practice employers should develop a policy for HCAs and other staff that covers study leave and costs if they do not already have one – as the practice in the example below. A sliding scale could be developed, ranging from:

- *100% practice reimbursement for all leave and costs for courses that primarily benefit the practice*
- *50–70% practice reimbursement to reflect the sharing of costs for courses that benefit both the practice and individual HCA by giving them transferable skills*
- *limited practice reimbursement for courses that do not benefit the practice or NHS at all.*

Example: Encouraging HCAs to take study leave

Thistlemoor Medical Centre provides all staff, including HCAs, with 5 days of study leave per year and encourages them to use it.⁷

The NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (NHS KSF)

The NHS KSF⁸ covers all HCAs working in general practice who are employed by PCTs and those working in general practice where practice employers take up the option under *Agenda for Change*(AfC)⁹. All GP practices are required to adopt fair employment practices to ensure fair pay and terms that satisfy equal pay legislation. There are helpful publications that answer frequently asked questions to explain how AfC affects independent GP employers.^{10,11} The type and extent of knowledge and skills that define specific roles as an HCA are useful in developing general practice teams, in agreeing skill mix, and planning training to evolve different competences.

The NHS KSF profile of a job will act as a prompt for action by HCAs and their managers at the annual appraisal to ensure that their knowledge and skills about their current job are up to date. The Teignbridge PCT and Torbay PCT's professional and educational career framework for nurses and support workers employed within general practice includes competencies for HCAs aligned with the KSF. Practice employers will be able to use the KSF profile to review opportunities for personal and professional development for individual members of staff. This should complement their current work or prepare them for another role to help them progress their career and benefit the service. It will help with succession planning in a practice and anticipate the knowledge and skills required for future roles that HCAs will be required or expected to undertake. See *Unit 3: Competences* to consider the linkage between the KSF and an HCA's competence.

Summary

- *Supporting HCAs to develop and progress their careers can help the practice to retain and motivate staff, and to recruit new staff.*
- *Practices can help HCAs to think about their career development by signposting local resources and providing opportunities for the HCA to network with fellow HCAs.*
- *There are three important national programmes which the practice can use to help HCAs to navigate the career choices:*
 - *The NHS Skills Escalator*
 - *The NHS Careers Framework*
 - *The NHS KSF.*
- *The practice needs to be prepared for workforce changes so succession planning is an important factor in helping the practice to plan for the development and progression of their staff, and to cope with change.*

References

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4. Department of Health. *Working Together – Learning Together. A Framework for Lifelong Learning*. London: Department of Health; 2001. <http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/05/88/96/04058896.pdf>.
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