

DEAN'S Notes™

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How New Grads Can Interview Their First Job

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The hospital marketed itself as a world-class practice environment. It had a preceptor program for new graduates, tuition reimbursement, a shared governance model, and an enviable retention rate. However, Lucy, a new graduate nurse, was unprepared and misdirected for her job interview. No one had coached her about what to ask to find out what these programs really meant. Walking away from an interview with a nurse recruiter, she was disappointed. "No sign-on bonus?" she thought, "I'm out of here."

What Lucy did not know was that she would soon be out of nursing altogether. Later that month she took a job at an organization that lured new graduates with \$10,000 sign-on bonuses. It was not enough. Two job-weary years later of inadequate staffing, unsympathetic managers and coworkers, and a negative environment, her reasons for becoming a nurse had been worked right out of her. What was missing in the first place? A job interview where the right questions had been asked.

As deans, you want to know that your graduates will find jobs where they can use the skills and knowledge gained from your programs. However, the reality of a workplace is not always obvious on the face of a job interview. Applicants need to ask the right questions to properly evaluate their opportunities. New nurses need to gather as much information about a healthcare setting as possible, and then decide if it is a match for their skills and attitudes.

Before the Interview - Organizations are not all the same. Some are great places for professionals; others are not and should be avoided. They all have an attitude – an organizational climate – that comes from the goals, values, and mission of the organization and how the people who work there

express them. For example, does the organization have a religious affiliation? Is it university-connected or research-based? Is it for-profit or nonprofit?

The mission of an organization can affect how nursing is viewed and even influence the delivery of patient care. One indication of nursing's importance can be reflected in the status of the chief nurse executive. Applicants should know who the person is and to whom that nurse reports. Are non-nurses in charge of nursing services? Is there a sense of teamwork among disciplines? In addition, while the organization's structure is important, nurses who seek employment would be wise to speak with nurses and even community members who have used an institution's services to find out how care is really delivered, and what kind of a workplace it truly is.

Some of this information can be gathered ahead of time from the organization's Web site. New nurses should enter the interview with as much knowledge about the organization as possible, and then build from there.

Not Just the Money, It's Staffing - Although salary discussions are inappropriate initially, nurse applicants should know the appropriate salary for the job before going into the interview. If the wage is out of line with nearby institutions, the nurse should know why. For instance, larger salaries can be "combat pay" for working in a risky location or with a difficult clientele. Some organizations need to offer higher rates because of internal problems. No amount of money can compensate a new graduate for the terror of juggling an unreasonable patient assignment without the support of supervisors, coworkers, and dedicated preceptors.

Because good nursing depends on adequate staffing, applicants should ask about the expected nurse-to-patient ratio, as well as the availability of ancillary support from nursing assistants, respiratory therapists, unit clerks, and house-keeping staff. What may be harder to determine is whether staffing on a particular unit is routinely adequate or a daily-occurring emergency. New graduates may have to informally ferret out this information later from nurses who already work on the prospective unit.

Applicants should also ask about staffing schedules. For example, are schedules generated in a central office or do unit managers or even staff determine who works when? If staff nurses control the unit's schedules, do they rotate that role among all of the staff or is it always the same group? Is holiday and weekend staffing divided equitably? In addition, are schedules posted far enough in advance, that nurses can plan their personal time? It is equally important to know how units cover unexpected absences. Are there backup plans, such as on-call staff, or is frequent or mandatory overtime used to cover holes due to sick calls, holidays, and vacation? At the same time, nurses need to know that they can use benefit time for illness or emergencies legitimately without being

penalized. Other scheduling specifics should include on-call, shift rotation, and weekend commitments.

Who's Your Boss? - Managers are still the number one reason nurses stay or leave a job. Nurses should never take a job without an opportunity to talk with their prospective supervisor. One of the things they will want to know is how the manager views his or her relationship with staff and whether that nurse's managerial style will be a match for them. For example, some managers consider staff as colleagues who should be making autonomous in practice decisions. Other managers like to closely supervise staff and their decisions. Some managers want a full shift's work from staff and nothing more; other managers expect participation in unit meetings, inservice days, and hospital committee meetings. New nurses need to fit in with their boss's expectations to succeed in their new jobs.

A powerful part of work life flows through the information that is shared between the organization, department, unit, and staff. An informed employee is an empowered one. Therefore, applicants should inquire about how information is disseminated. Are there regularly scheduled unit meetings? Does the chief nurse executive meet formally with staff, and can a nurse expect to see that person occasionally making rounds on the unit? Some organizations regularly publish newsletters or use Web sites and e-mail to keep staff in the loop.

On-the-Job Growth and Development - Every nurse who takes a new job needs an orientation, both to the organization and their work unit. However, new nurses especially need orientation from experienced staff to help them adapt to their new professional roles. New graduates should ask if they would have preceptors and further probe to determine the nature of the program. Is there a formal program with a timeline? Are preceptors trained and rewarded or simply assigned? Do preceptors carry a full patient load in addition to orienting the staff member? If so, the new nurse is likely to fail to receive the attention he or she needs — and deserves.

Of course, education is not over after orientation. Nurses should ask what continuing education (CE) is available through the organization and whether there is any financial support for external CE programs. They also need to know if nurses are given work time to attend internal education services and whether some programs are offered online for nurses' convenience. If the organization has no staff development department, the nurse should be especially careful to determine the options for further education.

If nurses are considering obtaining additional degrees, they should ask about tuition reimbursement. Questions should include what courses are eligible for reimbursement, what grades are needed to be eligible for reimbursement, and how long a nurse must work to fulfill his or her obligation for the funding.

New grads should have their future career in mind when selecting an organization. Learning if all jobs are posted and whether there is a clinical ladder can help in assessing potential for growth. It also helps to ask what factors determine job transfers and promotions.

Technology Does Matter - Technology capabilities of organizations vary widely, yet nurse applicants frequently overlook them. Nurses need to know if the equipment they will be working with is up-to-date and easy to use once training is provided. They also should determine the organization's com-

mitment to using technology to reduce nurses' workload. For example, online documentation can save nurses significant writing time, leaving more time to care for patients.

Other technology-related questions include: Is there an internal biomedical department that makes simple repairs to avoid long delays in returning equipment to the units? Do hospital employees have access to the Internet? Excellent, recent articles about new technology are available online and nurses need to have access to them.

Detecting the Answers - Nurses can find a complete checklist for evaluating a prospective workplace below and by accessing the online version of this article in the student section of www.nursingspectrum.com. However, it is not enough to arm new grads with a checklist and send them off to the interview. They must understand how to gather this information without peppering the interviewer(s) with too many questions. Sources include the human resources department, potential coworkers, the Internet, and their own eyes and ears — perhaps the best resource of all. When touring units where they might work, nurses can be alert to their environment, which can be far more revealing than any formal interview. For example, are the hallways cluttered with broken infusion pumps? Are nurses snapping at each other or collaborating to help each other out? Do monitors look up to date or relics from the dark ages?

With a bit of detective work, nurses can boost their ability to make a sound decision in choosing a workplace and, more importantly, their likelihood of job satisfaction.

Checklist for Evaluating a Prospective Workplace

The Organization:

- For-profit or nonprofit status
- Community, university, or religious affiliation
- Organizational mission and values
- Nursing department's structure, including the chief nurse executive
- Shared governance or traditional governance model
- Upcoming plans for redesign

Management

- Management style of supervisor
- Communication avenues (e.g., staff meetings)
- Grievance and discipline policies
- Performance appraisals

Staffing

- Centralized versus decentralized
- Self-scheduling
- Use of an acuity system
- Usual nurse: patient staffing ratio
- Ancillary support
- Weekends coverage
- Contingency plans for vacations, holidays, and sick calls and other unplanned absences
- Procedure for requesting time off

Pay and Other Benefits

- Base salaries, including differentials for education, specialty, seniority, and shifts
- Sick leave and vacation time
- On-call pay

On-the-Job Growth and Development

- Formal orientation plan, including content, length, and preceptors
- Tuition reimbursement for further formal degrees and continuing education
- Clinical ladder
- How promotions and transfers are handled
- Inhouse learning resources

Technology

- Use of technology to ease workload
- Internal repair capability
- Availability of Internet

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Convention 2003 Spotlight

With 3000 students and faculty expected to attend, the 51st NSNA Annual Convention will feature many exciting programs and activities for all attendees. Held in the beautiful city of Phoenix, Arizona you will be educated, empowered, and professionalized from April 23 – 27, 2003.

Top nursing leaders will present two plenary sessions addressing timely topics. On Thursday, April 24, learn how interdisciplinary teamwork can improve patient care and delivery and hear how this team of students is working together to make it all happen. Special guest speaker Dr. Linda Amos, Associate Vice President for Health Sciences and Professor of Nursing at the University of Utah will present *Interdisciplinary Education and Practice* and share the history of interdisciplinary healthcare and education and discuss models of interdisciplinary efforts in care delivery that have occurred over the years. The panel will consist of Moderator, Michael Desjardins, BSN, RN past NSNA President; Panel members, Chris Day, President Public Health Student Caucus; Annmarie McManus, Student Academy of the American Academy of Physician Assistants; Joshua Marc Cohen, Chair, Medical Student Section, governing council, NYU School of Medicine; Adam Smith, American Physical Therapy Association, Student Assembly. The National League for Nursing sponsors the Plenary Session.

Ethical uncertainties and dilemmas arise daily in the care of hospitalized patients, but ethical concerns do not stop with

patient care, they weave themselves throughout our lives. The Cross Country University is sponsoring Leah Curtin, DSc(h), RN, FAAN, Clinical Professor of Nursing at the University of Cincinnati College of Nursing and Health, and Editor-in-Chief of *Nursing Management* for 20 years to speak to us about Ethics and Nursing. Frank Shaffer, EdD, RN, Vice President of Education and Professional Development for Cross Country University in Boca Raton, Florida, will introduce Ms. Curtin.

The educational opportunities do not end there. Tom Smith, MS, RN, Senior Vice President, Nursing and Patient Care Services at The Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City will give the Opening Ceremony's Keynote Address on Wednesday, April 23. Mr. Smith will address the convention theme, *Nursing: The Hottest Profession You'll Ever Love*. Joining Mr. Smith on the stage for the Opening Ceremony will be nursing leaders from the ANA, NLN, NSNA, the military, and the Veterans Administration. Nurses Service Organization, Hatboro, PA., will sponsor Mr. Smith's Keynote Address and the Opening Ceremony.

Throughout the rest of the convention, focus sessions on over twenty topics will feature nurse specialists in a variety of practice areas. An 8 hour mini review for the State Board Exam sponsored by NSNA will be offered. Judith Miller MS, RN from Nursing Tutorial and Consulting Services will teach the review course. Activities such as association activity seminars, the House of Delegates meetings, exhibits, and social events will bring nursing students in touch with professionalism on a national level.

The NSNA Foundation Awards Ceremony and reception, which takes place on Thursday, April 24, is a gala event. Scholarship winners, the Spirit of Nursing Award winner, the Leader of Leaders Award winner, and the many winners of NSNA contests will be honored. The U.S. Army Recruiting Command sponsors the reception following the Awards Ceremony.

Fund raising for the NSNA Foundation's Mary Ann Tuft Scholarship Fund will take place at the convention. There will be an auction in the exhibit hall on Friday, April 25 (underwritten by Student Resources). Schools of nursing are invited to donate items to be auctioned.

Dr. Linda Burnes-Bolton, Vice President and Chief Nursing Officer of Cedars-Sinai Health System and Research Institute, Los Angeles, California will be the Closing/Endnote speaker. Dr. Burnes-Bolton is sure to send us off with feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment for many exciting days of learning and networking with our colleagues across the country.

You are invited to join us in Phoenix. Please plan your schedule now. The convention brochure is on the NSNA Web site under meetings. www.nсна.org. If you are interested in bulk copies of the convention brochure, call the National Student Nurses Association office at 718-210-0705 or email the receptionist at receptionist@nsna.org.

*Once you have finished with this newsletter,
please pass it along to share with a colleague or friend.*

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Faculty Schedule for 51st Annual NSNA Convention in Phoenix

NSNA offers the opportunity for faculty members, consultants, and advisors to obtain continuing education credit at the annual meeting. The following schedule will give you an idea of what is offered at the 51st Annual Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, April 23 – 27, 2003.

Wednesday, April 23, 2003

10:00 am – 11:00 am Orientation for new consultants and advisors.
 11:45 am – 12:45 pm Creating Better Online Teaching, Tips, and Techniques
 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm Creating Meaningful Careers
 6:00 pm – 7:00 pm Opening Ceremony and Keynote Address

Thursday, April 24, 2003

11:30 am – 12:30 pm Doing the "Write" Thing for your Career
 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm Leadership University: Scholarship, Professional Development and Course Credit Through Involvement in NSNA
 2:30 pm – 3:45 pm Consultant and Advisors Briefing
 4:00 pm – 5:00 pm How to Prepare Students for Job Hunting

Friday, April 25, 2003

11:00 am – 12:00 pm Implementing the NSNA Code of Ethics and Student Bill of Rights
 12:15 pm – 1:15 pm Recovering Strategies for Your Investment Accounts: To Still Retire on Time
 3:00 pm – 4:00 pm Are Your Test Questions Good, Bad, or Ugly?
 4:45 pm – 6:15 pm When Things Get Tense: Response vs Reaction

Saturday, April 26, 2003

8:30 am – 10:00 am Using the Media as a Health Promotion Tool

Do you have ideas for articles you would like to see in *Deans' Notes*? Would you like to write an article? We are making time to chat about *Deans' Notes* and your ideas at the 51st NSNA Convention in Phoenix. Email Judy Tyler at Judith@nsna.org for more information. We look forward to seeing you.