



The Nursing Labor Market's Structural Shift

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In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, stock analysts reported that weekly pay for temporary nurses had dropped another 15% to the low \$3,000s, helping to improve the bottom line at investor-owned hospital groups.¹ While travel nurse contracts and wages have been decreasing concurrently with pandemic-related hospital admissions, many wonder when (if ever) the registered nurses (RNs) who for the first time in their career decided (for a myriad of reasons) to travel to pandemic hot spots will return to permanent positions.

For as long as I have been a nurse, there have been travel nurses. As I look back over my career, I can remember surges in travel nursing happening primarily during the cyclical nursing shortages. There have always been nurses who have chosen a full-time travel career path because they wanted either to travel and see the country or the challenge of building a robust clinical skill set in a particular specialty. But for the most part, these travel nurses primarily filled temporary vacancies during past nursing shortages or during labor strikes. Today, some generational cohorts such as millennials seemed drawn to travel nursing, and there are, of course, travel nurses who decided a higher salary compensated them for ever-changing patient assignments, needing to adapt quickly to new organizations, and never feeling like a member of the team. But the environment has changed significantly—so much so that these same Wall Street analysts believe nurses will not be going back because of a “structural shift” in the nursing labor market.¹

Specifically, that shift being the lure of travel nursing continuing for those nurses who traveled for the first time during the pandemic. Many of these travelers enjoyed the flexibility and better wages, which they are now reluctant to give up.² In addition, the pandemic created numerous work-at-home options, so those nurses with a partner who can “work from home” may choose to remain a travel nurse to continue enjoying greater control and autonomy as to where and when they work. To illustrate how many RNs travel, in 2020 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a total of 43,160 RNs in Temporary Help Services.³ But in 2021, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 66,790 registered nurses (2.34% of the profession) in Temporary Help Services—a 55% increase.⁴ Whether this huge influx of travel nurses continues to grow at this rate remains to be seen.

Many nurses I talk with are re-evaluating their career options, which may include deciding to return to their previous employer or choosing to remain in the ranks of travel nurses in a staff or leadership role. But what is becoming clear is that although some of the first-time travel nurses do want to return to permanent positions, they are demanding healthier work environments, flexible schedules, better staffing, more autonomy, and greater compensation. One recent survey asked travel nurses about their future career plans. Fifty-five percent were seeking a permanent position with a median salary of \$65 per hour and to be part of a team again (among other reasons discussed below).⁵ But not knowing who will continue to travel or who will return to permanent employment status has shifted and is impacting the entire nursing labor market. Sherman⁶ said it best in the April editorial of *Nurse Leader*, “We now have a very different nursing workforce.” Are you ready for changing nursing careers brought about by this structural shift? This month’s column focuses on career expectations of travel nurses returning to permanent positions.

THE CURRENT NURSING LABOR MARKET

To understand the nursing workforce and career implications of the structural shift, it helps to explore the current nursing workforce. Recent research reveals that 600,000 Boomer RNs are expected to retire by 2030.⁷ Buerhaus and colleagues⁸ had projected that during 2019-2021, the nursing workforce would increase by 4.4%, but there was instead a 1.8% decrease, which resulted in 200,000 fewer RNs.⁹ In 2021, for the first time in nearly 4 decades, the supply of RNs decreased by more than 100,000.⁹ But most surprising is who those 100,000 RNs are. They are not, as we would have thought, nurses nearing retirement, but (and rather shockingly), we learned the great nurse resignation was predominately nurses under 35 years of age and those between 35 and 49 years of age.⁹ During the first 15 months of the pandemic, growth in the RN workforce plateaued⁸ when RN vacancy rates were reported to be anywhere between 9% and 37%, depending on the source. Nurses leaving the workforce exacerbated the ongoing nursing shortage.

Thankfully, after increasing only 1.3% in 2020,⁹ BSN enrollment rebounded by 3.5% in 2021, although 66,000 additional qualified BSN applicants were turned away due to the shortage of nursing faculty and

clinical sites.¹⁰ The other good news is that 18- to 29-year-olds remain interested in nursing careers.⁹ From one of the first quantitative studies of nurses in the United States, researchers found that 90% of the respondents intend to remain in the profession,¹¹ debunking numerous anecdotal reports about nurses leaving the profession in droves. So, this is the current climate in which employers are strategizing how best to recruit travel nurses back to permanent employment.

CAREER EXPECTATIONS OF RETURNING TRAVEL NURSES

Nurses returning to permanent employment can be highly selective about where they will resume their career. Because travel nurses experienced the same stress, fatigue, anxiety, burnout, moral distress, and post-traumatic stress disorder as permanent nursing staff, mental health and well-being programs are highly sought. Travel nurses reported that 79% of employers are not doing enough to support mental health and well-being⁵ beyond a basic Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Nurses will be looking for programs that demonstrate the organization's commitment to their personal well-being.¹²

Travel nurses learned to enjoy the sense of control and greater flexibility they had over their schedule.^{2,5} They are looking for the same flexibility and control, so employers should consider creating new and innovative scheduling options. Because nurses are also familiar with gig economy-type jobs or travel nurse positions, consider implementing these or similar options, which will be particularly attractive within large, geographically dispersed health systems. In addition, I have heard anecdotes about nurses asking for scheduling options other than 12-hour shifts or to share job roles or shifts. Now is the time to be creative, just when travel nurses willing to return to permanent roles are looking for work environments with flexible schedules, along with better nurse staffing and workloads.

Travel nurses are seeking greater autonomy, input into decision-making, stability, consistent patient populations, to be part of a team again, respect, and career development.⁵

They also are considering such things as the work environment, empowerment, and visible nursing leadership. It is unclear whether or for how long the lure of travel nursing will continue, but what is clear are the ways to lure travel nurses back to permanent positions.

CONCLUSION

Due to the structural shift in the nursing workforce, the expectations of an employer have changed for first-time travel nurses contemplating returning to a permanent

position. It is clear the pandemic has impacted the nursing workforce and careers. Exactly what the future holds is uncertain, but now is the time to be creative.

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