

Negotiating competing priorities in nurse shift scheduling

Globally, healthcare systems are losing nursing staff due to a poor work-life balance, among other job factors. Shift scheduling is a point of potential and actual conflict between organisations and nursing staff because of their differing priorities. Through interviews with nursing staff and managers, this evidence brief reports the findings of a qualitative study that reveals that collaborative and compromising approaches are the most effective ways to prevent conflicts from escalating. By reasonably meeting nurses' preferences through these approaches, organisations can support both individual well-being and organisational goals. Conversely, rigid policies and competing approaches often lead to conflict, low morale and turnover.

What is already known?

The global nursing workforce is experiencing significant challenges, including burnout, stress and absenteeism, which are intensified by unsafe staffing levels and poor working conditions [1]. In England, many nurses are considering leaving their jobs due to work-life imbalance [2]. Research shows a link between unfavourable shift patterns and a compromised work-life balance [3-4]. As a result, healthcare organisations, like the National Health Service (NHS), face conflicts between achieving organisational targets and supporting staff well-being through appropriate work scheduling.

Previous research in a variety of fields has established a link between work-schedule autonomy and employee well-being [5]. For nurses specifically, studies have found that more scheduling choice is associated with a decrease in sickness absence, burnout, turnover intentions and work-life conflict [4,6]. Recent research has also shown that nurses' shift preferences are mainly related to non-work commitments, schedule predictability and flexibility [3]. A significant gap in the literature exists in understanding how the competing priorities of nursing staff, nurse managers and hospital directors interact to influence shift scheduling decisions.

Our study aimed to explore the preferences and constraints of nursing staff, nurse managers and hospital directors, and how these factors collectively influence shift pattern decisions. By examining these complex interactions, we sought to identify strategies that could better reconcile the conflicting priorities of individual well-being and organisational needs in nursing workforce management.

What did we do?

This qualitative study used an interpretative approach and was guided by the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument [TKI] [7]. The TKI identifies five approaches to managing conflict: collaborating, compromising, accommodating, avoiding and competing [7].

Following advertisement via local R&D (Research & Development) departments, participants self-selected for the study and offered informed consent. Data were

collected between October and December 2023 through online semi-structured interviews with 17 nursing staff, five nurse managers and six hospital directors from five different NHS Trusts in England. Our interview guides covered topics like experiences with shift patterns, well-being and work-life balance. The interviews were transcribed, and the data were analysed using framework analysis (step-by-step process for organising and analysing words) [8]. Data collection continued until no new ideas were surfacing for nursing staff responses. We used a collaborative process to develop and refine the themes, ensuring a clear audit trail from codes to the original transcripts. We presented our themes to nurse leaders from the participating Trusts to confirm they resonated with their experiences. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki, with ethical approval granted by the Health Research Authority and the University of Southampton ethics committee.

What did we find?

The study identified three main themes:

1. Balancing Choice with Consistency, Predictability, and Flexibility

Nursing staff highly valued having a consistent shift pattern that aligned with their personal preferences, along with predictability and flexibility. We found that where nurses advocated for their personal needs related to external constraints and organisations failed to accommodate them, this led to staff turnover. Predictability in scheduling, through rosters being released well in advance, was a collaborative approach that benefited both nurses (personal planning) and the organisation (operational efficiency). Managers who used an accommodating approach to create rosters by prioritising staff preferences saw improved satisfaction and reduced sickness rates. Meanwhile, the labour shortage shifted organisational approaches from competing to more accommodating strategies:

"We didn't have night-shifts-only-contracts, it was not allowed, but now we have softened...we've realised... we've gotta go with what individuals want rather than it to be what the organisation wants. We're in

a buyers' market and that is what's pushing our behaviours"

2. Adequate Rest and Recovery Between Shifts

All participants agreed that sufficient rest between shifts was crucial due to the demanding nature of nursing. Conflict arose when rosters prevented adequate recovery, particularly with too many consecutive shifts. For example, when managers scheduled consecutive shifts without adequate breaks, this was seen as a competing approach that prioritised organisational needs over staff well-being. Nurses valued days off and often accepted long shifts in exchange for more days off, which represented a compromising strategy.

"The days off, I think, by doing long days, it means I get more days off, so I find that better for a work-life balance"

We also found that managers who connected earlier shift finish times to budget savings were using a collaborative approach, finding a "win-win" solution.

3. Enjoyment and Engagement at Work

Nurses valued meaningful patient interactions and team collaboration. Nurses also valued supportive managers who demonstrated an accommodating style by providing "time off the floor" for other supporting work-related tasks, which recognised nurses' professional development needs.

"It makes them feel appreciated about, you know, what they're doing, because it's not normal for a band 5 staff nurse to have a management day, and I think, well, they need it though"

Nurses also valued recognition of their well-being at the organisational level; however, our data showed there remained a disconnect between organisational well-being initiatives and the realities of shift work. This exemplified an 'avoiding conflict management' approach, as the fundamental incompatibility remained unaddressed.

What do our findings mean?

We found that collaborative and compromising approaches were most effective at preventing potential conflicts from escalating into actual conflicts. Conversely, avoiding or competing approaches often led to actual conflict, e.g. staff sickness or nurse attrition. The most significant trend was that a lack of flexibility, or a completely rigid and competing approach, resulted in actual conflict, such as nurse turnover. While accommodating approaches could be too simplistic for complex scheduling issues, we found that nurses sometimes compromised their professional values, like team cohesion, to prioritise work-life balance. This reflects a broader societal shift toward valuing work-life balance. Our research also expanded the understanding of choice in shift scheduling, showing that while choice generally benefits well-being, external constraints can limit the effectiveness of workplace solutions. This highlights the limitations of workplace solutions when

outside factors constrain true choice and may explain why some previous studies report mixed results.

Implications for practice:

- **For Nursing Staff:** It is beneficial to advocate for personal scheduling needs clearly, but be open to negotiation and compromise. Requesting flexible options that align with personal circumstances could be beneficial to improve well-being.
- **For Nurse Managers:** Implement flexible working arrangements and create systematic methods for gathering and responding to feedback on shift patterns. Use collaborative approaches to resolve scheduling conflicts, as they lead to more sustainable solutions. Pay special attention to intensive schedules, e.g., working four long days in one week.
- **For Hospital Directors:** Reframe the perception of staff scheduling preferences from a retention compromise to an organisational value and best practice. Implement specific modifications like earlier finishing times for long shifts and adequate rest periods to reduce nurse fatigue and burnout.

What are the main takeaway?

Collaborative and compromising approaches seem to be the most effective ways to prevent conflicts from escalating. By reasonably meeting nurses' preferences through these approaches, organisations can support both individual well-being and operational efficiency. Conversely, rigid policies and competing approaches often lead to conflicts, low morale and turnover. Our findings also provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of scheduling choices. While choice generally leads to positive well-being outcomes, external factors can limit its effectiveness. This highlights the need for a holistic approach to scheduling that considers both professional and personal factors.

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