Synergies are flowing from combined ST, CS role

A float position that combines the duties of a surgical technologist (ST) and a central service (CS) technician creates closer ties between the OR and CS departments and improved morale in CS for a 400-bed community hospital.

“These have been independent workforces, but they are highly related,” says Brian Whorley, business and supply chain manager for surgical services at Boone Hospital Center, Columbia, Missouri, which has 22 ORs.

“The OR can’t function without CS. It was a great opportunity for synergy between those departments.”

The OR and CS departments both report to the director of surgical services, Julie Miller, RN.

Opportunity arises
The opportunity arose when graduates of the local ST program were finding the job market to be limited. At the same time, there had been turnover among Boone’s CS technicians.

“We thought, is there an opportunity to do cross-training and labor sharing?” Whorley says.

The idea: Hire 4 ST grads into a combined CS/ST position with the expectation that they would float between the departments. Some had already done their practicums at Boone. Four more have since been hired into the combined “float tech” role. They typically spend 3 days a week in the OR and 2 days in CS. The program has been in place for over a year.

The float techs report to the CS department with a dotted line to supervisors in the OR. This is to ensure that their organizational “home” is in CS and to counteract a natural tendency STs might have to migrate to the OR if they have additional time.

The float techs are paid the same rate as the STs. Pay for the 2 positions varies by only about 10%. The combined positions are budget neutral, Miller notes.

Orienting float techs
The initial group was oriented first to the OR.

“We quickly found them a home,” says Heidi Woods, RN, OR clinical supervisor, referring to the initial specialties where the float techs focused.

When the second group of float techs was hired, their orientation started with CS, which Woods says was not as successful.

Float techs are not assigned call. Miller says she was concerned that it would take longer for the new STs to gain the experience necessary for them to be able to take call when their duties were split between 2 departments. Now some do pick up call from colleagues.

Role elevates quality
The combined position “has been a huge highlight for CS,” Woods says. “CS is a vital part of what we do in the OR, but before there was a disconnect. They didn’t fully understand their role in patient care.
“I think this role has elevated the overall quality of the department,” she continues. “The floats are ambassadors for both departments.” 

John Bequette, the CS supervisor, adds, “It has raised the overall professionalism and quality of our product as the floats mingle with the CS techs.”

It’s not uncommon, he says, for float techs on a Wednesday to assemble trays they will need for their Thursday cases.

“They know when they open a tray on the field, they will have exactly what they need.”

Leaders of both departments work together to account for the techs’ time.

“We wanted to let [their activities] flow without making the time accounting be cumbersome,” Miller says.

**Lessons learned**

Miller offers suggestions for those who want to try a similar arrangement:

• Manage the expectations of employees hired into the combined position.
  
  “Let the candidates know it is a work in progress,” she says. “Let them know, ‘We are committed to making this work, but we will be learning.’”

• The leadership teams in OR and CS must work in concert for the position to be successful.
  
  “If there are conflicts or a lack of coordination, those will be exacerbated by sharing employees,” Miller says. “Here the communication flows, and problem solving happens easily.”

Given the choice now, Bequette says he thinks that the float techs would not want to trade their positions for a full-time ST role. ♦

—Pat Patterson