Staff vacation gridlock eased by innovative allocation system

Developing a vacation selection process that is fair to everyone can be a daunting challenge for OR managers. The right balance between flexibility and adequate coverage can make or break staff satisfaction.

Having time away from the hospital is important for all OR personnel, but perhaps none more so than those who work day in and day out with oncology patients. “Vacation selection was an annual issue,” Shokjean Yee, MA, RN, CNOR, perioperative charge nurse at New York City’s Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), told OR Manager. “We would hang up a vacation request grid in June for vacations starting the following January, and it would not be finished until November or December. Vacations were granted according to seniority, and changes were rampant.”

After many years of confusion and staff dissatisfaction, a committee was formed to develop a new vacation selection process. The group collected staff suggestions and held multiple brainstorming sessions.

The vacation selection process now separates vacation allotments into specialty service cores and shifts worked, and a random sequence generator is used to ensure equity.

In addition to Yee, Elizabeth S. Pincus, MSN, MBA, RN, ACNS-BC, CNOR; Kristen A. Crookes, BSN, RN, CNOR; Dawn Pamas, BSN, RN; and Carole Cass, MSN, RN, CNOR, were also on the committee.

Core, shift designation

MSKCC’s main OR has 21 rooms and is staffed with approximately 120 RNs and surgical technologists. Staff members are separated into five cores: genitourinary/thoracic (GU/Thor), hepatopancreatobiliary/gastric mixed tumors (HBS/GMT), gynecology/colorectal (GYN/CR), orthopedic/neurosurgery (Ortho/Neuro), and head & neck/plastic/pediatrics (HN/PL/PED). The evening shift is separate from the day shift and is allotted vacation time as if it is a sixth core.

Nurses and surgical technologists are assigned primarily to one core, but they also can rotate out and work in multiple services.

Shifts include 7 am to 3 pm, 7 am to 5 pm, 7 am to 7:30 pm, 11 am to 7 pm, 11 am to 9 pm, and 9:30 am to 10 pm. Staff don’t rotate shifts, and there is a call team after 10 pm. Because MSKCC is not a 911 receiving hospital, the OR is not staffed 24 hours.

Anyone who works up until 7:30 pm is considered day shift, and those who work until 9 or 10 pm are considered evening shift.

Staff suggestions prompted separation of the evening shift’s vacation requests from the day shift’s requests.

“It used to be that staff would not only have to compete with people within their core based on seniority, they also would have to compete with senior evening staff,” says Crookes. “The entire staff believed the day and evening vacation selections should be independent of each other.”

Random sequence generator

To determine the number of vacation slots a core gets each week, the total amount of vacation weeks for the staff within that core is calculated and divided over 52 weeks.
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However, the number of vacation weeks a core is entitled to is not always spread evenly throughout the year, so some weeks need more slots than others.

Because there is always a question of fairness and how it’s perceived when allotting time off, says Yee, they decided to try a new strategy.

The committee used a random sequence generator (http://www.random.org/sequences/) to determine in a blinded fashion which weeks would have the extra slots.

“All a random sequence generator does,” says Pincus, “is to take a series of numbers and put them in a random order. If you give it 1 through 5, it will give you back something like 4, 3, 1, 2, and 5.”

**Vacation selection process**

Every September, 2 weeks are designated for vacation selection for the following year. A vacation grid is plotted out on an Excel spreadsheet showing the number of people who can take off each week in each core and e-mailed to each staff member. Empty slots on the grid are available; slots with Xs are blocked (sidebar).

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OR staff vacation request grid, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York City. Used with permission.
A lock box is provided for staff to submit requests. Using a form that lists all weeks of the year, they check off the ones they want. Staff members are eligible for 4 to 5 weeks of vacation depending on title and years of service.

“At the end of the vacation selection period, we start putting in all of the requests and plot them out on a copy of the grid,” says Pincus. “Usually two or three members of the vacation committee work together so we can double check each other,” she says.

The first thing the group does when granting vacation requests is look at whether the person had that week off last year. Staff members cannot have the same week off 2 years in a row. “This way, a senior person can’t get Christmas off every year if someone else wants it,” says Pincus.

From there, requests are granted according to seniority. A maximum of 2 weeks can be taken during prime times, such as holidays and summer, unless more time is needed for a special occasion. “The nurse leader has to give special permission for this, but weddings and honeymoons are always granted,” Pincus says.

When the grid is finished, there will be open slots in various cores. If a staff member from one core is also competent to work in another core that has an open slot, that person can take that open slot. However, day staff can only take day slots, and evening staff can only take evening slots.

A color coding system is used to signify prime weeks and evening shift slots. The system also helps keep track of individual vacation information that is used when allotting vacation time in subsequent years.

After the initial publication of the grid, the request for an open slot is granted on a first come, first served basis by the nurse leader.

“We had an issue with people changing a lot of weeks or turning them back in, so one of our rules now is a person can only return 2 weeks and can only trade with someone once,” says Crookes.

Once the grid is done, it is posted in the nurse manager’s office, and it is also posted online on the OR’s shared drive. Only the nurse manager can make changes after posting.

“The process is nonpreferential across the board,” says Crookes. “Even those of us who plot the grid have to submit our vacation requests on the first day. We can’t change our own requests or move our own requests around while we are working on the grid. We have to wait until it is posted like everyone else.”

Survey affirms process

“It was a long and sometimes difficult process to develop, but we all grew together and staff input was key,” says Pincus.

Several years after the new vacation selection process was implemented, the committee randomly distributed a five-point questionnaire to 52 staff members to get their perceptions. Results were favorable:

- 67% believed the process was fair
- 84% thought the separation of day and evening shifts improved the process
- 82% said they received at least 2 of the weeks they requested
- 67% believed the process had been improved by staff input
- 65% said annual staff input and feedback about the process were important.

“There is something to be said for consistency and knowing that rules are staying the same and are fair to all,” says Pincus. “It may seem a confusing way to do it, but to us it is perfectly logical.”

—Judith M. Mathias, MA, RN

Reference