

WorkKeys® Assessments Help Shands Jacksonville Medical Center Improve Employee Satisfaction and Patient Care

THE ORGANIZATION

Shands Jacksonville Medical Center, Jacksonville, Florida

THE CHALLENGE

Assure the workplace literacy of applicants for high-volume, high-turnover positions and ensure that employees are equipped to work in a complex environment requiring ongoing training

THE SOLUTION

Establish an on-site computer lab, and incorporate WorkKeys assessments as a pre-interview tool

The Results

- More than 500 applicants have completed the WorkKeys assessments, and 85 percent achieved qualifying scores
- 10–20 applicants per month are being hired using the new process
- Turnover has dropped 35–50 percent for several positions
- Hiring managers indicate they are:
 - Seeing a better quality of candidate
 - Spending less time interviewing
 - Observing faster learning curves among new hires
 - Experiencing lower turnover in the critical first 90 days
 - Documenting better attendance rates
 - Enjoying greater cohesion among team members, leading to improved safety and enhanced patient care

With a mission to heal, comfort, and educate, Shands Jacksonville Medical Center serves 19 counties in Florida and several counties in southern Georgia. Employing more than 3,500 people, Shands Jacksonville is a large academic medical center affiliated with the University of Florida College of Medicine and is one of seven hospitals in the Shands HealthCare family.

Shands Jacksonville introduced a new employee training and development initiative in 2001 and named it Success Academy. Director Pamela McCaleb has led the Academy team of training professionals, now nine persons strong, since its inception. Like many healthcare organizations, Shands Jacksonville was challenged by high turnover rates, which made it more difficult for McCaleb's team to help employees reach the desired level of success inherent in the Academy's name. Managers were asking for employees who could handle the demanding training once on the job and who would stay with the hospital longer, providing continuity of care and stronger teams.

McCaleb had used pre-hire assessment tools but had not heard of the WorkKeys system until Robert Wood, the Dean of Continuing Education at the University of North Florida, suggested she attend the 2007 WorkKeys National Conference in New Orleans to learn more. McCaleb admits she headed to the conference "a skeptic," and emerged "a believer."

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“Frankly, my reaction was, ‘wow!’” she said. “It was clear to me that by conducting job profiles and instituting assessments that would measure not only workplace skills but also workplace *literacy* skills, we could really make a difference.”

McCaleb and her team had an added incentive. The state of Florida made the assessments available at local WorkSource Center offices at no cost to employers or job seekers under the Florida Ready to Work program. She credits former Florida Governor Jeb Bush with promoting the program and the funding. In fact, Governor Bush gave a keynote presentation at the New Orleans WorkKeys Conference that won over McCaleb.

Gaining Organizational Commitment

Attaining management buy-in was the next objective. McCaleb’s first step was to evaluate the initiative in terms of the organization’s strategic goals. In other words, would the job profiles and assessments positively impact patient satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and costs? The answer seemed to be yes on all counts:

- Hiring and retaining higher-quality employees would lead to improved employee performance and therefore to better patient care
- Quality employees value professional development opportunities and more competent coworkers
- Reduced turnover and shorter training times would decrease costs

McCaleb approached the medical center’s leadership with this rationale and quickly won their commitment, largely because they are heavily invested in creating a culture of employee development and learning. They even agreed to establish a new computer lab to support skills development and on-site administration of proctored WorkKeys assessments. The management team was also supportive. Most were believers from the start, while a few expressed skepticism but remained open to trying the approach, said McCaleb. She worked hand-in-hand with her colleagues in human resources and recruiting to redesign internal processes. Also, union leaders were brought into presentations.

Job Profiling

With a green light to proceed, the first step was to begin profiling jobs at Shands Jacksonville. To date, 14 positions representing 24 percent of the medical center’s employee base have been analyzed by ACT-trained profilers associated with the University of North Florida. Threshold assessment scores were established for three WorkKeys foundational skills: Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, and Locating Information.

McCaleb recommends that new users give consideration to the types of jobs to profile. “If you profile jobs that have a large number of employees, you’ll reap greater return on your investment,” she said. Other recommendations include profiling jobs having the most impact on patient satisfaction and jobs with higher turnover rates. The 14 jobs profiled by Shands Jacksonville are primarily entry-level jobs. Some do not require a license; many involve patient contact. They include:

1. Clerical Associate
2. Emergency Department Technician
3. Environmental Services Associate
4. Environmental Services Supervisor
5. Financial Eligibility Advisor
6. Financial Representative (Admissions)
7. Food Service Associate Level 1

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8. Food Service Associate Level 2
9. Nurse Manager
10. Patient Care Associate
11. Pharmacy Technician
12. Security Officer
13. Transportation Associate
14. Transportation Supervisor

The job profiling process results in a detailed task list. Recruiters at Shands Jacksonville can use these lists to more clearly describe a position to applicants. McCaleb notes that task lists contribute to “role clarity” and help avoid situations in which employees and management may have differing opinions on the work to be performed as part of a specific job.

Instituting the Assessments

Shands Jacksonville conducts WorkKeys assessments in its on-site computer lab, proctored by a representative from the local WorkSource Center. “We assess up to 16 applicants each week, all on one day. Scores are posted electronically and are accessible by the medical center’s recruiters, who can see which applicants meet the threshold scores for a particular position,” said McCaleb. Interviews are not conducted until the required scores have been attained. “This saves time for the recruiters and for the hiring managers, because they can be sure of an applicant’s skill levels before they spend time interviewing, evaluating, and doing the requisite background checks.”

The WorkSource Center proctor can advise applicants who do not meet threshold scores on available skills training options. McCaleb reports that Shands Jacksonville has hired a number of applicants on the second or third attempt once score levels were met. “When the applicant ends up with a job, here at Shands or elsewhere in the community, then that’s a win/win for everyone,” she says. “We’re happy to help connect job seekers to the resources available through WorkSource offices so they can find employment.”

Achieving Certification

Applicants who earn a Florida Ready to Work Certificate on the basis of their WorkKeys scores are mailed a certificate regardless of whether they are hired at Shands or by another employer. Also, because the Florida certificates are part of ACT’s national RegiSTAR database, individuals who earn Florida certificates may log into the ACT website to order a National Career Readiness Certificate, providing access to a truly portable credential verifying their workplace skills.

Documenting Results

Data are collected throughout the process by recruiters, hiring managers, assessment proctors, trainers, and human resources personnel. Anecdotal reports from the management team have revealed some unexpected observations:

- Hiring managers report improved punctuality and attendance records by employees hired under the new process. They speculate that applicants who are unable to get to the test site on time or who might not show up at all are likely to demonstrate the same behaviors on the job.
- Recruiters report that applicants who object to the pre-interview assessment requirement tend to “self-select” out of the process. Some managers believe this serves to enhance overall team quality at the medical center.
- Trainers say it is helpful to know that applicants are able to use a computer well enough to take their WorkKeys assessments, even if their actual job tasks don’t require computer skills. That’s because much of the job training at Shands is delivered by computer.

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“Some managers resisted the process initially,” reports McCaleb. A few worried that the assessments would serve to diminish the pool of applicants to the point where the medical center would not be able to fill open positions. Shands Jacksonville’s leadership decided that hiring warm bodies solves nothing—Shands needs qualified workers who are able to perform the tasks identified by the profile, which are the same tasks performed by current employees.

Next Steps

McCaleb would like to profile additional jobs and add a WorkKeys Personal Skills assessment for selected positions. She’s considering the Talent assessment, which measures a candidate’s work-related attitudes and behaviors. She is interested in making use of the compound scales or indices that have been added to the Talent score report, particularly those that measure Customer Service Orientation and Teamwork.

Ideally, McCaleb would like to see more employees use the computer lab for ongoing skills development. Usage has been lower than envisioned, but she attributes this to the fact that working people are busy people and frequently face commitments that may interfere with personal development. The Success Academy staff is working on methods of encouraging greater use of skills training software in the future.

McCaleb may have traveled to the 2007 WorkKeys Conference a skeptic, but that didn’t last long. She was a featured presenter at the 2009 WorkKeys Conference in San Antonio, sharing her perspective on using WorkKeys assessments to improve organizational performance.

