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## Leveraging the intersectionality of healthcare and hospitality to diversify workforce talent and enhance patient experience

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### Abstract

As healthcare becomes more of a consumerism-based industry, organizations and leaders are embracing innovative approaches and models to drive patient choice and brand loyalty. Northwell Health, New York State's largest comprehensive health system, has integrated hospitality as a core pillar within its dynamic patient experience strategy. This informative case report highlights Northwell's pragmatic approach to designing, implementing, and sustaining an experiential internship program entitled, Hospitality in Healthcare Internship. The program has resulted in action-oriented patient experience performance improvement opportunities as well as create a robust pipeline of hospitality-minded talent into the organization.

### Keywords

Intern, internship, patient experience, hospitality, talent, workforce experience.

### Introduction

The healthcare industry is a highly complex ecosystem consisting of numerous nuanced yet co-dependent facets. Three years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, consumerism remains a prominent component of the healthcare landscape. Patients and customers hold the power of choice and therefore, brand loyalty due to increased access to information via publicly reported websites, social media platforms, and word-of-mouth to help inform decision-making. According to recent research overseen by The Beryl Institute, 92% of United States respondents rate "the importance of experience" as either 'Extremely' or 'Very Important.'<sup>1</sup> Given this reality, leaders are encouraged to continue investing in patient experience strategy, talent, and programming to help align to evolving consumer needs.

Prioritizing patient experience amidst regulatory mandates, quality measures, financial pressures, and workforce statistics requires a holistic and fully integrative approach. Especially, post-pandemic, healthcare professionals are actively managing and reframing patient and family attitudes and expectations around service, communication, access, and timeliness.<sup>2-3</sup> Consumers are also seeking digital technology via e-visits, virtual appointments, telemedicine<sup>4</sup> and patient portals to yield personalized, on-demand care transactions. Critical to this conversation is employee engagement. According to the 2022 NSI National Health Care Retention & RN Staffing Report, the

national hospital turnover rate is 25.9% and when looking at the past 5 years, the average hospital turned over 100.5% of its workforce<sup>5</sup>. With high consumer demands and current staffing challenges, innovative approaches and thinking are needed to address both components.

In navigating this unique transitional time, healthcare can particularly learn from and leverage core principles of the hospitality industry. Although many aspects obviously differ, there are parallels as both are heavily consumer centric. Afterall, 'hospital' is the root of the word, 'hospitality.' They share similarities around focusing on consumer experience, anticipating needs, optimizing workflows and throughput, employing a large workforce with varying levels of responsibility and relying heavily on publicly available ratings.<sup>6</sup> A Forbes article detailing a customers' desire for both systems (outcomes) and smiles (experience), concluded that, "allowing these two disciplines to meet near the middle affords the best chance for an institution and its customers/patients/guests to thrive."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, instead of resisting or ignoring the impact of hospitality on consumer mindsets, healthcare leaders and organizations are encouraged to explore this intersectionality. Going beyond adopting hospitality-based language and best practices, there is a timely opportunity to widen recruitment efforts to that workforce as well.

Northwell Health is a large, dynamic healthcare organization of 23 hospitals, and 850+ medical practice locations spanning geographically across New York City

boroughs, Long Island and within Westchester County. With 82,000+ employees, Northwell is the largest healthcare system and private employer in New York State, caring for more than 4 million individuals each year. Northwell prides itself on creating an unparalleled, effortless consumer experience where care goes beyond hospitals or exam rooms – with patients feeling known, connected, supported, and empowered throughout their care journey. In 2014, Northwell recruited Sven Gierlinger as its inaugural SVP, Chief Experience Officer to lead and operationalize this customer-obsessed mandate. Prior to working in healthcare, Mr. Gierlinger had an extensive professional history working for high-profile hospitality sectors, including the Ritz Carlton Hotel Company.

Due to his professional repertoire and having survived a life-altering personal experience with Guillain-Barre syndrome, Mr. Gierlinger had a strong interest in enhancing the healthcare delivery system with lessons learned from hospitality. In 2015, the Northwell Health Office of Patient & Customer Experience (OPCE) team, led by Mr. Gierlinger, created a patient experience strategy – a framework to drive excellence. The strategy is grounded in four foundational pillars: Culture, Care Delivery, Hospitality and Accountability. The Hospitality pillar is grounded in anticipating patient and customer needs and creating a warm and welcoming environment. During a gap analysis, the OPCE team learned that colleges and universities offer hospitality degrees, many of which require both classroom and onsite field-based courses within hotels, restaurants, and/or cruise ships.

This sparked the idea that healthcare can be the new hospitality frontier and how Northwell could tap into those higher education programs and develop an internship experience, one that is mutually beneficial for students as well as the organization at-large. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *intern* as “an advanced student or graduate usually in a professional field (such as medicine or teaching) gaining supervised practice experience.”<sup>8</sup> There are many potential benefits for an intern including but not limited to enhanced employability, more realistic expectations of the workplace, organizational learning, mentorship, and the development of critical thinking, written and oral communication skills.<sup>9</sup> This descriptive case report highlights Northwell’s innovative approach to transforming the human experience by integrating a hospitality-based internship as part of its strategic plan.

## Methods

Aligned under Northwell’s Patient Experience Hospitality pillar, the Hospitality in Healthcare Internship (HHI) has grown and sustained over the past six years. It has created a shared mental model that exposes healthcare leaders, providers, and teams to divergent thinking and ideas.

Engaged interns challenge institutional culture and history by introducing new and innovative ways to act on the expressed and unexpressed needs of customers. Historically, this type of internship did not exist as typical internships were centered around clinical specialties like nursing, medicine, and physical therapy. Therefore, to successfully implement this new program, the OPCE team partnered with colleagues within Human Resources, Workforce Readiness and Talent Acquisition.

The aim of the HHI is to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for interns to focus on holistic, non-clinical, hospitality-based approaches to enhance the patient and customer experience. The program is meant to augment existing hospitality and patient experience teams, projects, and programs. It is an immersive eight-week, paid summer internship. Selected junior and senior-level college students work at a designated acute care hospital or ambulatory care centers.

### *Intern Recruitment*

Regarding recruitment, HHI is posted on Northwell’s external careers website and applicants typically have varied majors from hospitality to business, psychology, biology, communications, and those currently pursuing medical, nursing and/or advance care provider school. Final candidates are further screened utilizing a virtual on-demand video interview platform since many of the students actively live on campus or study abroad during the academic year. Parallel to the recruitment and selection process, the OPCE team solidifies which Northwell entities have budgeted for an intern(s) and secures the patient experience and/or operational leader who will serve as Mentors, a critical component to the internship. Mentors are ultimately responsible for precepting, supporting, guiding, and coaching their respective interns. Support and preparation are offered and facilitated by the OPCE team for that role via informative meetings, resource documents and one-on-one conversations.

### *Intern Roles and Responsibilities*

Interns work primarily onsite and are afforded numerous opportunities to attend leadership meetings, participate in interdisciplinary performance improvement projects, interact and round with patients and family caregivers, analyze patient experience data, research evidence-based practices, assist with new programs and/or strategic priorities, etc. OPCE’s role is grounded in support and mentorship, performing one-on-one touch-base meetings to nurture professional relationships and guide interns throughout their experience. Interns also participate in team-building exercises as an opportunity to learn, work and network as a cohesive group. Most recently, the 2022 cohort engaged in a project inspired by a program originated by the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, “Tell Me More.” It offers a unique opportunity to enhance communication between patients and health care teams, by

showcasing significant personal attributes of the patient in the spirit of humanism, connection and empathy.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on the maturation of the HHI program, as Northwell has evolved its culture, thinking and processes to welcome and hardwire hospitality concepts, interns have been utilized in more diverse capacities.

Interns are exposed to a variety of experiences while at their site. They shadow many hospitality-based leaders and services such as Patient & Family Centered Care, Advocacy, Environmental Services, Food & Nutrition, Concierge Services, Chaplaincy, Patient Navigation, Valet Parking and Security. These varied and dynamic experiences provide key insights into how patient and customer-centered care is grounded in policy, procedure, operations, and accountability workstreams. It also highlights the importance and impact non-clinical, ancillary, and support teams contribute to a patient and family's overall experience. Exposure to clinical aspects is also eye-opening such as observing Resident Grand Rounds, bedside interdisciplinary rounds, discharge phone calls, education sessions, and other applicable forums.

### **Capstone Projects**

Throughout their 8-week experience, each intern is responsible for completing a capstone project. This program hallmark challenges interns to focus on one specific opportunity leveraging hospitality core concepts and/or patient experience best practices. With support of their Mentor and the OPCE team, interns identify, analyze, research, and begin implementing their project. Interns formally present their capstone projects in person to a large group, including the Chief Experience Officer, OPCE team, senior leaders, and patient experience leaders/teams. This report-out opportunity is particularly impactful, as interns personally create their presentation materials, hone public speaking skills, and deliver their work with professionalism, conviction, and passion.

### **Outcomes/Results**

The HHI continues to grow, evolve, and mature year-over-year (Table 1). Since its inception in June 2017, there have been five annual cohorts, a total of 71 HHI interns. Due to positive graduate endorsements, organizational impact, and word-of-mouth, the HHI has become

increasingly competitive. Each year, Northwell has seen 400+ applicants apply from students local to New York, across the United States and international. This large turnout validates that healthcare is an enticing industry for college students, particularly in a non-clinical capacity. Ultimately, select interns come from a variety of prestigious institutions which has aided in the caliber of projects implemented. Of the hired 71 HHI interns, only one individual did not complete the program, citing personal commitments. Of the remaining 70 interns, all successfully completed the HHI program and presented their capstone project. With the intention of developing a diverse talent pipeline, approximately 30% of eligible interns (those who graduated and interested in entering the workforce) were hired by Northwell following internship commencement. They primarily obtained roles as Patient & Customer Experience Specialist, Patient Liaison, Concierge, Human Resource Coordinator and Marketing Support Administrator.

Post-internship, the OPCE team invites interns and Mentors to complete an electronic, anonymous survey evaluation. The goal is to obtain direct feedback to help improve the program for future cohorts. Responses have been consistently favorable, with 100% of interns self-reporting their "Mentor provided engaging and meaningful work," "They were a valued part of the team," and "Would recommend this program to a friend." One intern reflected, "I really enjoyed having a project that was completely my own in terms of conception and creation. I'm confident that it will truly benefit the organization and feel honored to have learned and contributed to the healthcare environment." Similarly, Mentors reported having overwhelmingly positive experience with their specific intern as well as learning from the other capstone projects as they inspired new ideas for consideration.

### **Discussion/Implications**

The evolution of the HHI program has mirrored Northwell's transformation journey. Due to leadership, education, and programs like the HHI, hospitality is now hardwired as a patient experience strategic focus and has become part of the care delivery model. In the beginning, recruitment was challenging. This may have been due to the limited precedent of hospitality students working

**Table 1. Number of hired Northwell Health HHI interns, per year**

Year	Number of HHI Interns Hired	Number of HHI Interns Completed the Program
2017	4	4
2018	11	11
2019	21	21
2020	0 *due to COVID-19 pandemic	0
2021	16	15
2022	19	19

within a healthcare setting. Through Northwell's demonstrated commitment to patient-centered care, recent recruitment campaigns have attracted large numbers of accomplished and eager applicants. Similarly, at first, capstone projects were somewhat basic, with focuses primarily on patient rounding and diversion activities. However, as the organization continues to mature in its culture and care delivery model, intern involvement has become increasingly complex and dynamic.

In subsequent cohorts, the level of capstone projects markedly increased in sophistication and impact. As a result, projects evolved into programs such as plan of care communication in the Emergency Department, building community among patients with similar diagnoses, telephone etiquette education and behavioral competencies. Some interns focused on patient and family tracers where they collate observational data to create personas and journey maps, looking for areas of strength and opportunity. Other recent projects include enhancing lobby first impressions, surgical waiting room experience, redesigning way-finding signage and helping to design physical spaces that promote relaxation and well-being. Based on this development, it is recommended to seek high caliber students who have a strong interest in experience design, care delivery, and interpersonal skills. Lessons learned, the success of the HHI program also depended on the mentors. The OPCE team prioritized educating and empowering mentors so they can task and support interns with high-impact and meaningful work assignments.

One unintended consequence of the HHI was the how interns supported clinical team members. During proactive rounds, interns create relationships and connections with patients and families. The information they acquire is then integrated and discussed during interdisciplinary care rounds, further highlighting the impact of non-clinical team members on patient care. Looking ahead, Northwell's OPCE team is actively planning the next iteration of HHI programming, evolving to meet the needs of a consumerism-driven market. Interns will be placed in ambulatory care and medical practice areas since that is a continually growing area for Northwell and the healthcare industry at-large. This evolution would help further inject hospitality best practices into those patient care areas. Furthermore, gaining exposure outside of a hospital setting will also provide interns with experience and perspective across the care continuum.

## Conclusion

As healthcare consumerism continues to evolve, it is essential for healthcare leaders to embrace and adapt strategies from external industries, like hospitality, to meet the changing expectations and desires of patients and their families. The Hospitality in Healthcare Internship (HHI) at

Northwell Health has demonstrated the impact of integrating hospitality principles and best practices into the healthcare operating ecosystem. This innovative program required leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, engaged mentors and a clear vision of intended goals. By recruiting and investing in interns from diverse backgrounds and educational disciplines, the HHI has not only contributed to the individual intern's learning but has also aided the organization's patient experience cultural transformation journey.

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