



MEDBRIDGE

7 Strategies for Building a Strong Rehabilitation Nursing Team

in partnership with Kristen Mauk, PhD, DNP, RN, CRRN, GCNS-BC, GNP-BC, FARN, FAAN,
President of Senior Care Central/International Rehabilitation Consultants

Overview

In December of 2020, a study by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation reported that 2.41 billion people—or about one in three people in the world—could benefit from rehabilitation at some point in their life due to illness or injury.¹ The study’s researchers found that this number increased by a full 63 percent between 1990 and 2019.

According to the American Hospital Association, inpatient rehabilitation facilities (IRFs) are best equipped to help patients with complex rehabilitative medical needs due to their ability to provide dedicated, comprehensive rehabilitation via clinicians who have the expertise to promote the best possible patient outcomes. With the growing need for rehabilitation worldwide, it’s becoming increasingly important for healthcare organizations across geographic areas and settings to build teams of highly skilled rehab nurses.

For a rehabilitation nursing team to be effective, staff members must work closely and collaboratively toward agreed-upon goals while expertly treating patients using evidence-based clinical strategies. That’s why it’s crucial to ensure that your rehab team has the communication and clinical skills it needs to succeed.

Purpose of this guide

This guide will provide rehabilitation nursing leaders and managers with evidence-based information to address the challenge of building and maintaining a strong, successful nursing team. The resources here will also assist decision-makers with strategies for recruitment, training, and retention of the best rehabilitation nurses, who can then promote positive patient outcomes in those requiring rehabilitative care.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is designed for:

- Nurse administrators responsible for rehabilitation units
- Nurse managers on rehabilitation units in a variety of settings
- Nurse educators who provide onboarding and orientation in rehabilitation nursing
- Therapists who serve as directors of rehabilitation settings

What you’ll learn

This guide will help you:

- Recognize and eliminate common barriers to establishing and maintaining a successful rehabilitation nursing workforce in order to improve quality of care and clinical outcomes
- Learn seven strategies for building a strong rehabilitation nursing team
- Identify recommended resources for building and educating your rehabilitation nursing staff to improve retention

Table of Contents

- [Role of the rehabilitation nurse4](#)
- [Barriers to establishing and maintaining a successful rehabilitation nursing workforce5](#)
- [Seven strategies for building a strong rehabilitation nursing team6](#)
 - [Assess your current rehab team6](#)
 - [Plan for future success6](#)
 - [Implement a reasonable plan with time limitations7](#)
 - [Education, education, education8](#)
 - [Promote evidence-based practice9](#)
 - [Invest in branding/marketing9](#)
 - [Increase visibility10](#)
- [An investment that pays off11](#)
- [Recommended resources11](#)
- [References12](#)
- [About the author12](#)
- [MedBridge: Your Complete Solution13](#)

Role of the rehabilitation nurse

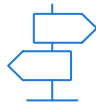
While all team members are essential and important, rehabilitation nurses are unique in providing 24-hour care for patients and clients. They are key members of an interprofessional team that provides expert direct care, advocacy, support, and education for patients and families who have experienced life-changing events through chronic illness or disability.

Rehabilitation nursing is a well-defined specialty with its own scope and standards of practice, core knowledge, and related competencies.² Research shows that nurses with well-developed knowledge and skills in physical rehabilitation help drive better patient outcomes and experience better job satisfaction.

Within their primary role, rehabilitation nurses wear many hats, including that of:



Teacher



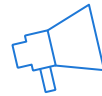
Leader



Research consumer



Evidence-based practice champion



Advocate



Counselor



Care coordinator

As an expert nurse clinician within an interprofessional team, the rehabilitation nurse specializes in knowledge and skills related to:



Nutrition



Skin and wound care



Bowel and bladder management



Medications



Behaviors



Psychosocial and spiritual issues



Communication



Patient and family education

Rehabilitation nurses might also engage in care coordination as case managers or life care planners. They contribute as essential members of the interprofessional team during team conferences, advocating for the needs of patients and families. In addition, the rehabilitation nurse is the primary team member responsible for safe care transitions between settings, including discharge to home.



Barriers to establishing and maintaining a successful rehabilitation nursing workforce

Although the benefits of rehabilitation nursing have been well documented, several barriers may present a challenge for building a strong nursing workforce. These include:

- Lack of knowledge of the skills and expertise rehabilitation nurses bring to the team
- Lack of knowledge of rehabilitation nursing scope and standards of practice
- Failure to identify rehabilitation nursing as a unique specialty with its own unique core curriculum, unique competencies, and unique scope and standards
- High attrition with the following possible causes:
 - Low job satisfaction
 - Inability to advance in career
 - No clinical ladder
 - Noncompetitive pay
 - Understaffing
 - Perception of overwork
 - Perception of lack of administrative/leadership support
 - Lack of a strong nursing department
 - Failure to implement evidence-based practice
- Poor communication between disciplines and/or within the nursing unit
- Lack of recognition of the contributions of nurses



Seven strategies for building a strong rehabilitation nursing team

1 Assess your current rehab team

All nurses new to rehabilitation, even if experienced, need to be educated in the principles and skills of the rehab specialty. Most consider themselves advanced beginners to rehabilitation but bring other strengths from orthopedics and neurology that could be used to build a more robust nursing team.

To identify where there are skill gaps, and to assess your team’s unique skills and experience so that you can make the most of them, survey your nurses to determine:

- How they rate their knowledge of rehabilitation
- Whether they hold a CRRN® certification
- Their length of employment
- Their years of experience
- Their job satisfaction
- Their knowledge of your organization’s Press-Ganey scores
- Where they fall within Benner’s model from novice to expert

2 Plan for future success

Aim for a structure of shared governance within your organization that allows for mutual goal setting between management, leadership, and staff. Supporting your staff in leadership and workforce development can help improve staff retention, as engaged employees tend to be more satisfied in their roles.³

Ask your employees what their professional and personal goals are within the field of rehabilitation. Then ask what you can do as a manager or leader to help them accomplish these goals. This might mean budgeting for additional educational opportunities or the chance for willing staff nurses to attend local or national conferences so that they can make presentations, increase their own knowledge, and bring new ideas back to the unit. Work with your staff to create manageable goals in categories such as certification, poster presentations, conference attendance, and continuing education.

LEARN WITH MEDBRIDGE

MedBridge Leadership Development Solution

Strengthen your organization while empowering your leaders to thrive through changing times.

MedBridge Workforce Development Solution

Give your staff access to hundreds of courses taught by industry experts in microlearning and chapter format for busy professionals.

3 Implement a reasonable plan with time limitations

After you've assessed the skills and competencies of your staff members and gathered their input on career goals, it's important to revise your clinical ladder so that your team has clear goals to aim for. Focus the clinical ladder on areas such as certification, advanced degrees, ARN membership, or leadership education, setting specific timelines for goal achievement.

Set your nurses up to successfully hit their goals by providing them with the education they need to promote clinical excellence, improving quality of care, and boosting staff engagement and retention.



Clinical ladder framework

Certification, higher education, and membership in relevant professional organizations are encouraged and rewarded.

CRRN® certification is supported and expected within three years of employment.

Effective, evidence-based [virtual leadership training](#) that is convenient for clinicians to access is offered on an ongoing basis.

All RNs have their [CRRN® prep course](#) paid for and completed within two years.

Tuition reimbursement of \$4,000 per year for pursuing higher education is provided.

LEARN WITH MEDBRIDGE

MedBridge CRRN® Prep Program

Our self-guided program is designed to give you the tools you need to pass the test, gain expertise, and advance your career—all while earning CEUs.

Leadership for Non-Managers

This course from Linda M. Shell, DNP, MA, RN, focuses on the development of leadership skills for those in non-management or informal leadership roles.

4 Education, education, education

One piece that's especially important to emphasize within your clinical ladder is continuing education. Set your nurses up to successfully hit their goals by providing them with the education they need to promote clinical excellence, improving quality of care, and boosting staff engagement and retention.⁴ Here are some strategies for implementing a continuing education program at your organization:

- **First, identify the need.** In what areas do your nurses most need additional training?
- **Identify high-quality training content.** Find courses taught by an industry expert with an advanced degree and an established reputation in rehabilitation nursing. Other criteria to look for in an educator include publication and presentations, authorship of book chapters, or teaching experience in rehabilitation nursing.
- **Build in incentives for staff.** For example, provide lunch and learns where the meal is provided during a short educational setting, or create learning competitions for team members. For online education, allow an hour for lunch so that learners do not have to take personal time on days off. Make it easy and enjoyable for staff to learn.
- **Use creative strategies to encourage learning.** This includes online learning such as that offered by MedBridge. Be sure all of your learning modules—regardless of in-person or online—include participant engagement, take-home materials, videos, polls, or other strategies to promote learning.

LEARN WITH MEDBRIDGE

MedBridge Continuing Education

Our evidence-based online continuing education includes easily consumable, just-in-time training and short chapters to help busy professionals learn best practices for increasing consistency of care, better serving patients, and improving outcomes.

- **Create a journal club.** Whether online or in-person, journal clubs are a great way to keep staff members informed and engaged. Each month, choose an article for staff to read and discuss from *Rehabilitation Nursing Journal* or *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*. Articles with CE credit could be used. Many professional journals offer a free CE feature at specific times of the year.
- **Put up posters around the workplace.** Instead of their normal duties for the day, assign your most creative nurse to work with the nurse educator to put up educational flyers or posters in key staff areas to promote learning.
- **Hold team huddles.** Rounding, team rounds, or short daily huddles can be great times to give tidbits of important information that directly relate to current patient care and cases.
- **Lunch and learns.** Invite one of your specialty physicians, advanced practice nurses, or pharmacists to speak on a topic of interest in the areas of spinal cord injury, TBI, or a neurological disorder, for example.
- **Provide written materials.** Keep copies of rehabilitation nursing journals and textbooks in the unit library or common areas for your staff.

5 Promote evidence-based practice

Once you've addressed ongoing skill and career development within your team, ensure that staff members are following evidence-based best practices. Larger rehab facilities often have an evidence-based practice council run by APRNs who work with the nurse educator of the facility to promote best practices and update policies and procedures. If possible, create or engage with a group within your organization that can provide this type of oversight to promote nurse education, learning, and retention while driving better patient outcomes.

Fostering a positive brand image can help encourage good staff morale, spread the word about your rehab organization or unit, and attract more qualified candidates for new roles.

6 Invest in branding/marketing

Once you've addressed your team's education needs, fostering a positive brand image can help encourage good staff morale, spread the word about your rehab organization or unit, and attract more qualified candidates for new roles. To do so, start by looking at areas such as:

- What you and your rehab staff members want your rehab unit to be known for
- The specialty areas that your nurses excel at (for example, TBI, SCI, stroke, neuro, or something else)
- The branding of your overall organization, so that you can create branding that dovetails with this but also has a unique aspect

LEARN WITH MEDBRIDGE

MedBridge Stroke Resources

Over 30 stroke rehabilitation courses that allow your clinicians to advance their clinical skills and help patients and caregivers become active participants in their recovery.

Treating Patients with Neurological Deficits

This course from J.J. Mowder-Tinney, PT, PhD, NCS, C/NDT, CSRS, CEEAA, provides rehab therapists with evidence-based treatment concepts for improving function in patients with neurological deficits.

7 Increase visibility

Rehab nurses are team oriented. They want to be an essential and recognized part of the interprofessional team.

Start recognizing your rehab nurses within your organization through:

- Career advancement, including a clinical ladder with clear requirements
- Shout-outs when there is a special event or accomplishment
- Newsletter announcements
- Recognition of accomplishments in staff meetings
- Nominating your nurses for awards, such as annual ARN role awards and internal awards and recognitions
- Delivering patient and family appreciation notes

Within the larger community and nationally, you can:

- Encourage membership in professional associations
- Start an ARN chapter
- Get CARF accredited
- Nominate nurses for larger awards
- Apply for grants
- Promote nurses running for board of director positions or other positions of leadership in their professional organization
- Engage in research and scholarly work through QI projects or by creating a research team
- Publish in professional journals and publications with pieces such as reports on clinical work, case studies, reflections on rehab nursing, or EBP projects
- Present posters at regional and national conferences
- Present podium presentations or workshops at conferences



An investment that pays off

By providing your nursing staff with opportunities for ongoing professional development while identifying and building on their current strengths, you can create a virtuous cycle in which your employees are engaged, motivated, and ultimately empowered to practice at the tops of their licenses. As a result, your organization can improve patient satisfaction, reduce staff attrition, and boost the quality of care overall.

By providing your nursing staff with opportunities for ongoing professional development while identifying and building on their current strengths, you can create a virtuous cycle.

Recommended resources for rehabilitation nursing development, education, and retention

Education and Training

[MedBridge CRRN® Prep Program](#)

[MedBridge Nursing Education](#)

[MedBridge Rehabilitation Nursing Certificate Program](#)

[ARN Core Curriculum](#)

Rehabilitation Organizations

[Association of Rehabilitation Nursing \(ARN\)](#)

[American Medical Rehabilitation Providers Association \(AMPRA\)](#)

[American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine \(ACRM\)](#)

[International Society of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine \(ISPRM\)](#)

[International Rehabilitation Consultants \(IRC\)](#)

Journals

[Rehabilitation Nursing](#)

[Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation](#)

References

- 1 Cieza, A., Causey, K., Kamenov, K., Hanson, S. W., Chatterji, S., & Vos, T. (2020). Global estimates of the need for rehabilitation based on the Global Burden of Disease study 2019: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019. *The Lancet*, 396(10267), 2006-2017. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32340-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32340-0/fulltext)
- 2 Wade, D. T. (2020). What is rehabilitation? An empirical investigation leading to an evidence-based description. *Clinical Rehabilitation*, 24(5), 571- 583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269215520905112>
- 3 Healthcare Finance News. Cure for healthcare’s high employee turnover is engagement, expert says, 2017. <https://www.healthcarefinancenews.com/news/cure-healthcares-high-employee-turnover-engagement-expert-says>
- 4 Mauk, K. L. (2013). The effect of advanced practice nurse-modulated education on rehabilitation nursing staff knowledge. *Rehabilitation Nursing*, 38(2), 99-111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rnj.70>

About the Author

Kristen L. Mauk, PhD, DNP, RN, CRRN, GCNS-BC, GNP-BC, FARN, FAAN, has 37 years of experience in chronic illness nursing, rehabilitation, and gerontological nursing and teaches in these specialties at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. She is certified in rehabilitation as a gerontological nurse practitioner and clinical nurse specialist. She has authored or edited eight books, including three that were recognized with an AJN Book of the Year Award. She has served on editorial boards for rehabilitation nursing and geriatric nursing and has written numerous articles and book chapters. Dr. Mauk is a frequent presenter at conferences at the regional, national, and international levels. She is the cofounder and president of Senior Care Central/International Rehabilitation Consultants, providing educational, clinical, and legal nurse consulting in rehabilitation and senior care in the US and internationally. Dr. Mauk is also a past president of the Association of Rehabilitation Nurses (ARN) and has served ARN in many roles, most significantly on the Council of Leaders, as editor of the fifth edition of the Core Curriculum, as PRN course faculty, on the task force to develop the ARN Professional Rehabilitation Nursing Competency Model, and as editor-in-chief of *Rehabilitation Nursing*.

To contact Dr. Mauk, email kmauk@seniorcarecentral.net.

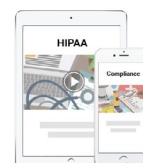
Your Complete Solution for Developing Your Rehab Nursing Team

As you saw in the guide, with the need for rehab growing worldwide, it's increasingly important to develop a collaborative, highly skilled rehab nursing team that can help your organization elevate quality of care and improve outcomes.

MedBridge provides the personalized training programs and engagement tools you need to effectively onboard, develop, and retain a successful rehab nursing team.

Onboarding Solution

Provide personalized training programs to remediate skill gaps and boost productivity, clinical competency, and quality of care.



Workforce Development Solution

Engage your employees and help them advance their careers by providing opportunities for specialization and ongoing advancement in an easily consumable, just-in-time format.



Leadership Development Solution

Develop highly skilled, resilient leaders prepared to guide their teams and your organization through the most challenging situations and rapid change.



Continuing Education for Nurses

Give your staff access to hundreds of courses taught by industry experts in microlearning and chapter format for busy professionals.

Learning Management System

Remediate gaps in knowledge by seamlessly creating, assigning, and tracking staff educational plans.

CRRN® Prep Program

Help employees pass the test, gain expertise, and advance their careers.

Clinician Mobile App

Make it easy for your clinicians to watch courses and earn CEU credits on the go or at home.

Certificate Programs

Accredited, evidence-based courses in specialty areas like stroke, spinal cord injury, and brain injury.