



HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT FIRST JOB

BY CYNTHIA SAVER, MS, RN

There is good news for job shoppers: the job outlook for new graduates is bright! In the face of a growing nursing shortage, lack of RN experience is no longer the drawback it once was, especially in critical care, the emergency department, the operating room, and, in certain areas, maternal/child health. Some facilities, particularly in the mid-west and at rural hospitals, are even experiencing shortages in med/surg.¹ Organizations struggling to fill empty job slots are taking a fresh look at new graduates, bringing back internships which provide new grads with the extra training they need to excel in specialty areas. All this adds up to good news for you, the graduating nursing student. More than likely, you'll receive multiple job offers. But how do you determine the right job for you?

Research Pays Off

Just as most of us would never buy a car without doing research, you need to research the organizations offering you positions. Ideally, you did comprehensive research before your interview, obtaining information on the size of the organization, the services it provides, its history, and of course, numerous other factors. Now you must dig deeper. Talk with former employees about their experiences. Ask about employee turnover and security precautions. Consider the organization's reputation, and read its mission statement. If it doesn't mesh with your values, you certainly won't be happy. If one of your choices means relocation, research the city or town and check valuable statistics regarding salaries, crime, and cost

of living. Web Sites such as Moving Network (www.movingnetwork.com) provide this kind of information.

How Important Is Money?

All too often, job seekers focus only on salary or lucrative sign-on bonuses. Remember that your long-term job satisfaction depends on more than money. Compare hourly rate, shift and weekend differential, as well as benefits such as vacation, sick time, holidays, parking, insurance (disability, health, and life), child care, and retirement plans.² Don't rely on a one-page summary; request the benefits booklets and read them carefully.

Check to see when your health insurance starts – you might have to wait three to six months. And it's never too early to think about retirement. Examine the plan and check to see if it has "defined contribution," which means that you can transfer your money to your next job. Sometimes, a minimum number of years of service are required before you can claim 100% of the contributions.³

Professional benefits include tuition reimbursement, clinical ladders, and shared governance. Of these three, tuition reimbursement is the most common offered by hospitals.⁴ Ask about any dollar limit per year, and the requirements of this benefit. For example, some organizations require that you maintain a specific grade point average to receive reimbursement. In addition to outside education, ask about internal staff development offerings.

Also, learn what is being offered in the community for similar positions by checking employment advertising in

local newspapers, national nursing journals, and nurse-targeted publications such as *Nursing Spectrum*. Don't forget hidden expenses such as buying uniforms, and issues such as commuting. You may think a 45-minute commute is no problem in the spring or summer, but what about in winter, driving on icy roads on your way to your night shift?

The People, the Hours, the Atmosphere

What were your impressions when you toured the facility? Did you feel rushed, or did you have time to stop and ask questions? Did the staff appear professional and satisfied with their jobs? What was the physical environment like? While no unit is perfectly neat, signs such as equipment and dirty linen lining the hall can indicate a lack of adequate space. Above all, did you have the opportunity to see how patients were cared for? How does the organization communicate with its employees? Look for organizations that convey information in a variety of ways such as newsletters, internal TV, and personal communication with supervisors. Policies and procedures should be provided to you in writing and easily accessible on the nursing unit. Don't forget to ask about computerized documentation; it can save you a great deal of time, giving you more time to spend with patients. Find out if staff is included in the decision-making process when appropriate. Ask how nurses are evaluated, the chances for promotion, and past history in this area. For example, are nurses promoted from within? How are raises determined? What is the

process for transferring from one unit to another, and what is the policy on "floating" to other units?

Don't lose sight of the most obvious considerations: those factors which will make you the most fulfilled at work. For example, even if this is your first clinical job, you already know if you are a night owl or an early riser, and you should keep this in mind when assessing the rotation schedule. And let's not forget interpersonal relationships. Reflect on your interview experience. Were your future colleagues enthusiastic and professional? Did they make you feel welcome, or like just one more cog in the wheel? What about your future boss and/or supervisors? If you didn't get to meet the individuals you would be working with during the interview, ask if you can meet, call, or even e-mail them.

Above all, assess the big picture and what your job will mean for your future. Is the job compatible with your future career plans? Will it serve as a stepping stone to your next position and provide you with skills you can take to your next job? For example, you may want to work with communities in developing health prevention programs. A good first job might be as a public health nurse, where you can develop community-based skills such as home health care. If you are deciding on an internship program, consider the following:

How long is the program? Does it provide a combination of classroom and hands-on experiences? Will you have an assigned preceptor throughout the program? What is your time commitment after completing the program? If you do not meet your commitment, what are your financial responsibilities?

The employer evaluation sheet helps you compare potential employers. But once you have the facts, follow your instincts. Will you enjoy going to work everyday? That's the bottom line. Finally, if you decide to accept the position, be sure to get the salary, benefits, and starting date in writing. Then go out and celebrate!

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Employer Evaluation Sheet

This sheet allows you to evaluate potential employers and provides a basis for comparison.

- 0 = Unsatisfactory or missing data
- 1 = Fair
- 2 = Good
- 3 = Excellent

This institution bases its policies and procedures on specified standards of nursing practice. 0 1 2 3 4

You will be reporting to a nursing administrator as opposed to a non-nursing administrator. (In general, it is better to report to a nursing administrator; however, in today's team-based environments, this may vary.) 0 1 2 3 4

The roles and responsibilities of the position were explained clearly and adequately. (Score an extra point if the job description was provided in writing.) 0 1 2 3 4

The nurse-patient ratio is reasonable. (Score an extra point if there is an approved administrative mechanism to negotiate a potentially unreasonable assignment, often called "protest of assignment"). 0 1 2 3 4

There are opportunities for administrative and/or clinical advancement. 0 1 2 3 4

The orientation for newly hired staff is adequate. (Score an extra point for a preceptor program.) 0 1 2 3 4

There is continuing education and on-site training, especially for new roles and responsibilities. (Score an extra point if off-site training and education is encouraged, and an additional point if some remuneration is provided.) 0 1 2 3 4

The starting salary for the position is satisfactory. 0 1 2 3 4

The benefits package (health/life/disability insurance, vacations, holidays) is satisfactory. 0 1 2 3 4

Specify additional factors to be considered on the following lines and score as above: _____

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4. The HSM Group, *Op cit*.