An eye bank experiments with additional training head count to meet its ultimate goal: curing blindness.

A Vision for Growth

BY GRETA TABER AND BRIAN WASHBURN

When you check off the box to be an eye, tissue, and organ donor at the department of motor vehicles, your decision will most commonly result in the restoration of sight to someone who has corneal blindness. SightLife, a Seattle-based nonprofit organization and one of the world's largest eye banks, is working to eliminate corneal blindness around the world through this process of donation, and it all begins with a phone call to recently bereaved families.



PHOTO: ISTOCK

Training qualified staff to coordinate such sensitive phone calls with grieving family members, busy hospital staff, and a variety of other stakeholders is resource-intensive. It is a tricky challenge to balance empathy (families are receiving a phone call about donation at one of the worst moments of their lives) with efficiency (corneal tissue must be recovered within 24 hours and transplanted within two weeks). Historically, it has taken an average of two months to onboard, and six to eight months to fully train these transplant donor coordinators (TDCs).

The opportunity

In the summer of 2015, SightLife was preparing to expand its operations into new geographic territories along the East Coast of the United States. One of the most critical tasks associated with the expansion was to increase the number of TDCs who were trained and qualified to approach families by telephone to discuss cornea donation.

Senior management at SightLife also asked the 1.5-person training team to reduce the amount of time it took to onboard TDCs by 50 percent, without sacrificing the quality standards that partner agencies, hospitals, and grieving families had come to rely on.

The solution

The training team consisted of one full-time training manager and a training specialist who split her time between training and normal TDC work, such as calling families or coordinating with hospitals and funeral homes. The training manager approached the organization's leadership with a proposal: Convert the training specialist position into a full-time training role.

This request was unique to the way SightLife had traditionally operated. The small size of the training team kept administrative costs down. However, the leadership team realized that asking the training specialist to continue shouldering training responsibilities in addition to her core tasks would not get the organization to its goal of reducing time to competence for new TDCs by 50 percent. Therefore, the team was willing to allocate an additional part-time employee to focus solely on training.

With just that modest increase in training resources, the training manager found herself in possession of something she'd never had before: time to think strategically about ways to reduce time to competence for newly hired TDCs. Without that time, the training manager had been in constant "firefighting" mode.

Over the next several weeks, the training manager rolled out a new, expedited onboarding program that featured formal training from the training team and mentoring from experienced TDCs. Everything was done with a laser-like focus on the fundamental skills required to successfully approach families and coordinate donor cases autonomously.

Mentors were selected based on performance, their interest in being a mentor, seniority, and shift work. The management team created specific goals for the mentors; key performance indicators are measured as a mentor-mentee team, which means that the mentors are on the hook for the performance of the new hires. The mentor and mentee work the same shifts and weekly check-ins for the pairs ensure that training is progressing.

The training manager also evaluated the old training plan to identify how traditional training tools could be used more effectively. To meet the fast-approaching deadline that required the TDC department to be fully staffed to take on the additional territory, it was necessary to identify the tasks crucial to the job and then to streamline the training to fit the time available.

The two trainers created an expedited training program for the TDCs' first five weeks on the job. Key goals were identified for each day and a variety of methods were used to ensure that the trainees were continually challenged. Each week the trainees were encouraged to provide candid feedback about their training, which the trainers used to modify future lesson plans.

At the end of the third week of training, new TDCs were able to start working with their mentors as productive members of the team. Both trainers also met with the mentors to help tailor individual plans for the trainees' continued success.

Results and lessons learned

The allocation of a part-time employee to join the department's training manager in training and coaching new TDCs has produced several significant improvements in efficiency:

- Approximately 50 percent reduction in the time it takes for a TDC to be fully trained to autonomously approach a family for a donation discussion. (Initial onboarding was reduced from two months to one month, while overall time to competence shrank from an average of six to eight months to three months.)
- Average department-wide authorization rates have remained steady throughout this process, meaning the compressed schedule did not have an adverse effect on quality or performance.
- Authorization rates for the first 40 nonregistered donor calls of newly signed-off TDCs (a key metric demonstrating mastery of autonomous job duties) increased from 59 percent to 63 percent.

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Beyond operational efficiencies, there has been a wider social impact from the increase in training headcount:

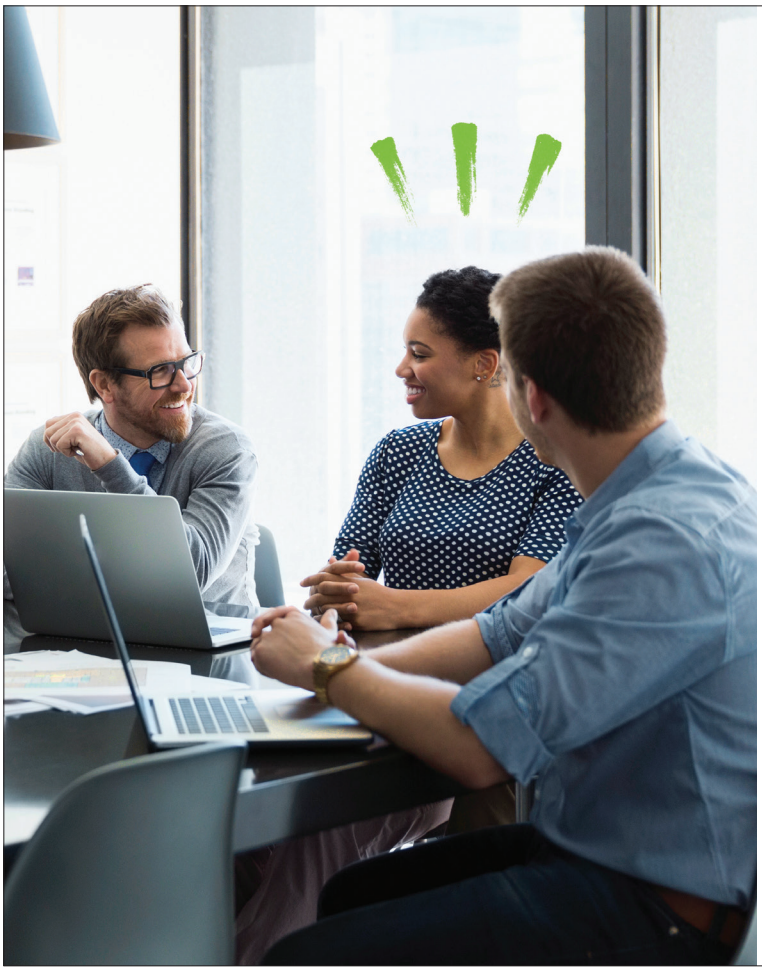
- Following the implementation of this training program, SightLife has been able to adequately build staff to provide full coverage to its new East Coast territory, resulting in a 25 percent increase in the number of corneas available for people waiting to have their sight restored.
- It is projected that the increase in authorization rate by 4 percent will result in more than 100 additional corneal transplants over the course of 2016.

What about the administrative costs of adding training headcount? While SightLife is a nonprofit organization, it cannot continue to carry out its mission if it is not financially viable. However, the revenue resulting from these efficiencies is projected to be almost 10 times more than the amount the organization invested in the additional part-time employee.

One of the biggest takeaways from this experience is that while investing in additional training headcount seemed to be a superfluous administrative expense, it proved necessary to meet the training goal. In this case, SightLife was able to reduce the initial training timeline by half and the overall training timeline by 3.5 months without watering down the effectiveness of TDC performance. Also, senior staff who had previously been called on to train in an ad-hoc manner could now focus solely on what they do well: running an efficient department.

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