

Upgrade a Nursing Career with an Online Master's Degree in an Era of Global Competition

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Economists often point out how global free markets can mean that an extreme circumstance in one country can have big effects in another country. That's increasingly the case when it comes to employment.

Here's an example: Let's imagine that a small nursing shortage exists in a country with an advanced economy while an even bigger nursing shortage exists in a lesser developed country. If there is little or no migration possible between the countries, circumstances in one country won't have much impact on nursing employment in the other country.

Open the borders for people in each country to work in the other nation, and the effects will be measurable. If, in addition, nurses in both countries speak the same languages, there will be a substantial shift in nurses from one country becoming available to work in whichever country has higher nursing incomes, better living conditions, and a more desirable quality of life.

In the typical case, a free market condition could lead many of the best nurses in the lesser-developed country to move to the more-developed country, leaving behind a bigger and more challenging nursing shortage.

Now, let's consider how incomes and working conditions affect the supply of nurses in a free market within a more developed country. If there aren't enough nurses, pay and working conditions will improve. That's true because the supply of nurses cannot be expanded very rapidly through immigration and nursing school graduations.

How much pay and working conditions will improve depends on how large the nursing shortage is and what's happening to the incomes and working conditions of the nurses' spouses. If incomes and working conditions for nurses' spouses are also improving, nursing incomes and working conditions will have to increase much more than for the spouses before part-time nurses will be attracted to taking full-time jobs and those who aren't working return to the nursing profession.

The reverse can occur as well. If there is no shortage of nurses and spouses' incomes are falling rapidly, nurses' incomes may fall much more rapidly than in the general population because a surplus of experienced nurses will go back into the workforce at the same time that other experienced nurses are seeking more hours.

Economists often don't advise on what a nurse might do in such a disadvantageous circumstance to offset downward pressure on employment opportunities, compensation, and working conditions. One opportunity is to learn an advanced practice type of nursing for which there is a shortage. In the United States today, some of those higher paying advanced practices include anesthesiology, oncology, midwifery, and nurse practitioner. Master's degrees and certification are required to obtain these positions.

It's also important to consider future nursing needs. One of the least attractive nursing jobs now is being a manager because the small extra pay doesn't usually offer much compensation for the extra hours and added stress. Yet, nursing management is one of the areas where the potential future shortage is largest in many economically advanced countries.

In addition, it's valuable for nurses to create other forms of differentiation. For instance, someone who knows how to apply quality practices to enhance the outcomes at the same or lower cost can deliver benefits that someone is likely to pay for. Such practices are usually learned through specialized training, often at the master's and doctoral levels in nursing management programs.

If it's valuable to make one nursing unit more effective, how much more valuable might it be to help lots of nursing units accomplish the same results? That's also a factor for those who become top nursing professionals in large organizations with the charter to pass along best practices throughout the organization.

Let's take a broader look at creating even more positive results in healthcare organizations. In many cases, nurses have become consultants who assist a number of organizations that are seeking to find and apply best practices.

Nurse consultants can bring even more value to their clients when they also gain perspective from observing many organizations through surveying assignments for accrediting firms and other monitoring groups.

By specializing in one type of healthcare activity that's very nursing intensive, such as homecare, they can further enhance their attractiveness to potential employers and their clients.

It's one thing to make such an economic argument, but it's another thing to apply the free-market principles I have been describing to enhance a nursing career, income, and lifestyle. Let me shift from theory to practice by describing the experiences of Ms. Sharon Litwin, an RN (registered nurse) consultant who is a partner in 5 Star Consultants, a firm she started in 2003 that specializes in enhancing homecare services.

Let me tell you a little about Ms. Litwin's background. She earned an RN degree from Reading Hospital School of Nursing in Pennsylvania before graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Health Sciences from Chapman College.

As an RN, Ms. Litwin soon found herself drawn to nursing management opportunities. She served as a critical care director at a southern California hospital for six years. Her next post involved quality improvement for the entire hospital chain, preparing individual hospitals to implement quality assurance programs and to become accredited.

She was later attracted to homecare and has worked in that nursing field for 20 years. She began as a regional director for a national homecare organization and later served as executive director of a large hospital-based homecare system before starting 5 Star Consultants. She has been a CHAP (Community Health Accreditation Program) surveyor and is currently an ACHC (Accreditation for Healthcare Commission) surveyor.

Unlike RNs who earn masters' degrees for advanced practice careers, Ms. Litwin saw a master's degree as a way to enhance her skills and knowledge as a consultant. By focusing her learning on the homecare applications of nursing management, she was able to deepen and broaden her expertise in ways that are highly attractive to her clients.

Having started a consulting firm, she was unsure how she could obtain such a master's degree without taking too much time off from work and being required to take courses covering what she already knew well. She found what she needed with an online master's degree program at Rushmore University, from which she graduated in 2005.

Adding this academic knowledge and credential to her many years of top-flight practical experience made Ms. Litwin just the kind of consulting expert that homecare companies want to employ to make their organizations more effective.

She and her partners have applied their expertise in a number of ways. Clients of the firm can purchase a wide variety of inexpensive manuals to help them improve policies, procedures, appraisals, and performance. Applying just one of those manuals can improve patient care at a cost that is a tiny fraction of the benefits gained.

The firm provides educational seminars for those who would like interactive ways of learning better management practices for conducting various homecare activities.

Clients can also hire 5 Star Consultants to provide consulting services, assisting homecare, hospice, private duty, home infusion, and equipment companies to improve their operations, regulatory compliance, staff and management training, financial viability, marketing, and start ups.

Where will Ms. Litwin's career take her next? The sky's the limit. Her consulting experience has made her even more attractive to organizations that are looking for top flight management talent. She is also gaining tremendous insights into improving homecare practices that could easily become the basis for doctoral studies in management, should she wish to engage in that type of learning. In addition, her writing could be turned into text books for homecare management students who are RNs.

It's hard to imagine her career being adversely affected by any free market conditions in light of the great contributions she has made and will undoubtedly continue to make.

Is your nursing career equally well supported by your education, experience, and current work so that you will be continually more sought

after? If not, consider how you might use online education to expand your choices and credibility to gain a more satisfying and rewarding career as an RN.

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