

ImproveWell.

The Improver Podcast | Episode 8 | Recruiting, retaining, and celebrating the flexible workforce

(00:00)

Welcome to The Improver, the podcast that explores ideas in healthcare improvement and participatory change. Hosted by Dr Na'eem Ahmed and Lara Mott.

Lara Mott (00:13)

Hello, and welcome to The Improver. I'm Lara Mott, CEO and co-founder of ImproveWell.

Na'eem Ahmed (00:20)

and I'm Na'eem Ahmed consultant radiologist and co-founder of ImproveWell.

Lara Mott (00:25)

We are delighted to welcome Nicola McQueen to our podcast today. Nicola is CEO of NHS Professionals, the largest temporary staff supplier to the NHS. She is passionate about workforce business issues, having spent the past 20 years supporting and creating effective staffing strategies across both the private and public sectors. She's also CEO of Doctors Direct, the locum service for managers, professionals and non-executive director of ImproveWell. So Nicola, welcome.

Nicola McQueen (00:54)

Welcome indeed. Hi, guys.

Na'eem Ahmed (00:57)

Nicola, so many of us that are actually working in healthcare, like myself in the NHS, will know what NHS Professionals does and is, but how would you describe NHS Professionals?

Nicola McQueen (01:09)

Yeah, of course, I mean, NHS Professionals. So I think easiest way to describe it is that we're the largest flexible staff bank, operating across the NHS. It's got 180,000 Bank members, mainly clinical resources, but actually a very growing, rapidly growing actually, non-clinical workforce too, which has become really important throughout the pandemic. And we have a simple purpose, we put people in places to care, we do that across England, we do that across more than 100 trusts in the country. And in terms of scale, our members provide just over three and a half million clinical hours to the NHS each month. So, we're a pretty critical service. And we're a critical workforce partner across the NHS. But importantly, one of the things that we do is we're here to expand the available workforce to the NHS as well. So we've got a whole variety of gateway programmes and that allows us to bring in new and trained workforce into the NHS. And we're also the largest provider of international nurses as well from all across the world, but primarily India, Philippines and the Middle East, into the NHS. And I guess the other thing to say is that we're pretty unique, because we're owned by the Department for Health and Social Care, which means that all of our surplus monies go straight back into the wider healthcare system. And it's not small amount, actually. So, during 19/20, this was over 15 million pounds. And for us, that represents a real reason why so many of the healthcare professionals choose to work with us, because whilst they're doing a shift, they're working through us providing a service to that particular trust or ward. But actually, they're helping the whole of the NHS, which is quite meaningful to many of them.

Na'eem Ahmed (02:58)

You've done some fantastic work, obviously, throughout the pandemic, but one of the standout contributions is with the COVID vaccine programme. How did NHS Professionals help with that?

Nicola McQueen (03:11)

Yeah, I mean, that, I think that's just going to be memory forever. We got a call on one Sunday evening to say, Can NHS Professionals stand up and help deliver the vaccine workforce across the UK. And we're like, right, okay, yes, of course we can. But the undertaking was going to be huge. So this was recruiting some 25,000 new people into the healthcare system at a significant rate. So we got the call just before Christmas, and we were deploying people during January. And our role in that really was to manage the advertising campaign, and help all the workforce through the application process, which we tried to make really quick and simple and easy. And once I'd got through that bit, we were directing them to the right training. And once they were training, we were deploying them across the system. So that was mainly to the national vaccine sites that stood up across the UK, but of course into the trusts as well and into GP surgeries. So yeah, significant role. And we did that for the first round of vaccines. And we've continued to play that role throughout the pandemic. And, of course, with a big surge in boosters. Before this last Christmas. We also played a role in that, and we recruited another 6,000 vaccinators to that that piece of work.

Na'eem Ahmed (04:32)

I mean, that's a that's a phenomenal achievement. And, you know, it was obviously a historic programme. And actually a lot of the benefits that we're seeing, you know, politicians and health service leaders and the wider community leaders talking now, is due to all the important part that everyone well volunteers and vaccinators took part in. So like ImproveWell, I guess NHS Professionals is a people business, we're really interested in how we support people how we get the best out of people. And what would you describe, I guess, Nicola, you as the leader, right, in terms of what matters to you in terms of running your organisation and working with people, what are the things that, you know, you hold kind of dear to yourself in terms of values, and you try and inculcate in your organisation?

Nicola McQueen (05:28)

Yeah, I think, well, speaking personally, I guess what has been, you know, pretty challenging times, and rewarding times as well. Having respect and compassion for everyone that I interact with is incredibly important. And I think one of the things that I certainly champion through the pandemic, with our own workforce, was something where we discussed that we're not all in the same boat, we just happen to be sort of sailing in these same unpredictable seas. And with that meant having compassion with, for people really, and that was just so so important. And I think that's important as a leader, but also for the role that we play in the system, and the people that we're deploying so, so that's a really incredible, incredibly passionate value that I have is that respect and compassion. And you'll see that really, we just align our values to those that we see across the NHS, with promoting honesty, integrity, accountability. And one of my other favourite ones is partnership approach. And I think what we did see through the height of the pandemic was this, just brilliant examples of how businesses were collaborating and working towards the sort of single goals. And like we just talked about the vaccine workforce was just such a great example of this, where businesses had to come together really quickly and collaborate well, to achieve some of those things. And the same with the Nightingale, so that's a really, that's a value that I will hold dear as well.

So being able to partner, being able to work together. And then this year, we've launched something in our organisation called the Member Promise. And that's about how the people that interact with our business feel. So we've got this thing where we say we were here to welcome, support and celebrate them. And that's because they're part of what is a really, really important part of the NHS workforce. So it's the flexible workforce community. And we say that we're there to celebrate them and support them. Because if we can do that, and we can benefit their lifestyle and their career choice, we'll keep them in the NHS longer. So that's really important theme that sort of running through our business at the moment. And what we're seeing is that flexible working is a career choice. And it's becoming a really, really popular career choice now for many, many people. So having that right at the heart of our value set, celebrating them and valuing them is really important too.

Lara Mott (08:02)

Nicola, given the challenges that we've all been through over the last couple of years, you know, you were brand new-ish into the role at the time, or a few months in certainly. So how have you felt as a leader, leading your business through this, all of the challenges that you've had with your remote onboarding, I guess, and maybe short, fast tracking all of the onboarding and looking after that workforce? What have been the challenges for you personally, in that role, because we haven't been through a pandemic before, so there's no rulebook. And you obviously had to make decisions very, very quickly. So can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Nicola McQueen (08:45)

Yeah I mean, nobody told me in my interview that I was about to lead a business through a pandemic. And certainly, it was, yeah, it was month five, actually. So fifth month into the role. And we were about to go into a global pandemic, and NHS Professionals had to then lean into supporting the NHS. So my priorities just had to change overnight. And they did. And there's, there's a couple of things that I sort of take from that period, really, the first one was about how we created a sense of mission. Because we had a lot, there's 1000 staff in NHS professionals that we have to communicate to, what is our role in this and what is our mission and we kept it really, really simple and clear. And that was to get as many frontline workers to the frontline as quickly as we possibly could. And everybody knew that that was a priority and it was all consuming. So anything else that was going on in the business at that time, if it wasn't to do with that, we just stopped it and we just stopped flat. And I guess our decision making at that point went from efficient (ish) to super efficient, and that was reinforced by the gold silver bronze crisis command structure that we stood up during the first lockdown, like many of the NHS, trusted. And what that meant is that we could make decisions as an executive team twice a day, which would, pretty much, be monthly in a normal cycle. So we became very, very quick and agile. And we were really clear on what we had to do by when, and why. And I think that was the ticket, really, to some of that sort of early success, it released this huge amount of energy and pace and innovation. And the results were just outstanding. So we talked about some of the vaccine work we did. But right in the first wave of the pandemic, we launched a campaign called Stand Up, Step Forward and Save Lives. And it was a, an advert that we put together over the course of just a few days, we put it on national television, we put it on national radio, and we had more than 60,000 clinicians stand up within 30 days, and put their application in and say, I'm ready, I'm here I want to go and support. And, you know, it was our duty at that point, our business to be able to pivot all of our resources into making that a quick and easy process. And what would normally sort of take us probably about three months to onboard a clinician safely into the NHS with the right training and onboarding checks, and so on, we were doing in 48 hours. And that was just phenomenal, that was the first thing that we kind of had to do.

And, you know, we had to then sort of retain that energy and then keep releasing even more, because all of a sudden, we started to realise, that this pandemic was probably going to be the long haul. So we had to make sure that we had sort of short sprints. And today, you know, we consider some of that learning through those early months. And so we at the minute, we've got a strategic vision, it's called V 22 and Beyond. And it's our vision as to where we want to be in the next 12 to 24 months. But what we learned through the pandemic was to get the energy to get the pace and to get the innovation. If you set it into mission oriented operational priorities that ultimately deliver that vision, you keep the energy high, keep the commitment there. But you also get the deliverability at the front of mind. So that was the first thing for me, is that the pandemic taught us how to be agile, flexible, fast, creative. And then my sort of second thing that probably coming in as the chief exec, I wouldn't have had much regard to but the pandemic taught us that we needed to understand when to get some downtime.

Nicola McQueen (12:44)

And you know, it, we did all of these amazing things, because the adrenaline was flowing, and it was flowing powerful, and it was fast. But it was a really powerful reminder that actually, you know what we're human, and running that hard and that fast all the time. Well, firstly, it's not possible. But it's not healthy. And one of the things that I noticed after the first, sort of, mission was that, when the mission is complete, you can get this sort of sense of confusion and the momentum sort of shifts, and you can lose some direction. And I describe it to my teams actually as something like you see in athletics or elite athletes that go into this ultimate training for a really, really big event. And then feeling completely lost when all over. And even if they've done really well, or they've got a gold medal. They have this sense of loss at the end. So I noticed that in the early part of the pandemic. So, you know, making sure that we built in downtime throughout the pandemic was really, really critical. And what that did is it then sort of made us think about how do we do that, rather than having sort of downtime at the end of these sprints, we needed to build it into the midpoint. So we sort of rotated who had holiday when so that people could sort of refresh, get energy, bring energy back to the team. And we didn't have the sort of sprints, fall off a cliff, sprint fall off a cliff, so we could keep the momentum going all of the time. And I think it's all very topical right now, isn't it because before the pandemic, I think for me, it would have taken a lot actually, for me to take a proper break. I'm just used to always work in at a million miles an hour and on multiple things. But I've actually learned personally now that I need to stop taking breaks and then consciously build in downtime because, you know, it doesn't have to be anything too dramatic. It could just be certain little things every day, a couple of hours in the evening, or planning some family time away, or just really quickly breaking up your day by walking toward meeting and that could just boost the energy. So I think there are things, Lara, that I would reflect on, I think, particularly in coming in new chief exec, you know, complete about face in terms of my strategy. And I will take those two things now into our sort of peacetime. And there remain forever.

Lara Mott (15:18)

I mean, I have one more question before I hand back to Na'eem, but you touched on a few things there that I think will resonate, and it's been amazing to see how flexible working has been embraced in the pandemic, you know, not least, you know, in your setting, but home working, juggling family. I think the world has realised that actually, you know, it doesn't necessarily need to be confined to nine to five hours. How have you, well, I suppose my question is, given that you are, you know, a successful woman in business, successful female leader, you're juggling a family juggling an intense job, you know, you've touched on a few things there that you do now.

But, do you think that your own personal kind of situation helped you kind of tackle this with perhaps empathy or perhaps, you know, a level of understanding that you're also juggling as well as your, you know, your colleagues and your, your workforce? Because I think if employers can have empathy, you know, it's obviously, much easier to respond to the personal needs of your employees, that empathy is something that perhaps in the corporate world or other sectors may not be as, as present as it is in a health and care workforce, where empathy is obviously something that a lot of frontline colleagues naturally have in order to pursue a career if this passion, so yeah, do you think well, How did you approach it all, from that point of view?

Nicola McQueen (16:57)

Yeah, for sure. And, you know, I think I've always been an empathetic leader, but I think it made us all sort of stop and think about, we always had this kind of level playing field in with the start, everyone was kind of forced into perhaps home working situations managing multiple things. And actually, we learnt a lot about our colleagues during the pandemic, because very often, you'd see people's children pop up on teams meetings, or dogs, or, you know, the door would knock and the postman would come and, you know, we, we sort of got this different lens to people's lives, which makes us makes us all really human. So even as a leader, and I was giving these staff briefings every Friday, but you know, the same things would happen to me with my camera on and one of my children would run in and want to use the printer or something. And that that made us all very human. So we naturally thought about everybody's own personal situation. So I did think that it made probably all of the leaders more empathetic, I think it does open your eyes to circumstances outside of our working lives. And I love what's come out of the pandemic, in terms of that flexibility and flexible working, I love that it's here to stay. I think it's created a really level playing field as well across some of the some of the sectors. And I'm really just curious to how we can make sure we keep some of it alive in the NHS, because, you know, a lot of our roles are patient facing. And through the pandemic, we had to really flex shift patterns, we had to be really, really flexible to how workforce could come in and out of their environment. And I'd love to see some of that stay, because I think that's important to everybody. And it's most definitely important to keep in our workforce in the NHS for longer, particularly as they're thinking about doing something different in their life or perhaps coming up to retirement, if we can really embrace this at will empathetic leadership and flexible working, when it's just there isn't a more important time for that.

Na'eem Ahmed (19:03)

And one of the I mean, which we all feel is that everyone's working 100 miles an hour, both clinical and importantly, as you said, non-clinical staff. But now we're going into this recovery phase. But I guess for many staff, both clinical and non-clinical, is not really a recovery because his recovery in terms of service, but in terms of people, How do you ensure that both of those things can happen at the same time? Which is a tricky balance.

Nicola McQueen (19:42)

It's really tricky, because you're absolutely right Na'eem, for our workforce in the NHS, they've been full on the entire time and we're seeing, you know, demand just continue to increase through the roof. So, there's a few things here for me, it's making sure that we can make the most of the technology that we've embraced through the pandemic. So we've got great services that have been stood up in virtual wards, we need to just take that into our piece time and through the recovery, allow staff to flex in and out of those services to build in flexibility for them. I think what that will do is help us keep people in the service longer. And we've got a huge responsibility to try and keep hold of all of those people that stepped up through the pandemic, when the NHS brand was at its strongest people wanted to support.

And we saw people come in from, you know, a whole variety of industries. And it's our job now to try and keep them. And to keep them, we need to be flexible, we need to be really flexible, we need to be flexible on how they work, when they work, where they work. So I just think we've got a lot to do. And I think, you know, that will help the recovery, of course, but we've got it yeah, big, big job as leadership across the NHS to keep as many people into the service as we can.

Na'eem Ahmed (21:00)

And then is there things that I guess internally NHSP, you, you've probably adopted, just to get people into this, you know, help them through this recovery phase?

Nicola McQueen (21:14)

Yeah, I mean, some of the big things that we've been looking at is making sure that those that are truly choosing flexible working as a career option, that it can be a career option, that we can give them long lines of work. And we can give them the commitment. And that safety and that support to keep training, keep keeping their skills refreshed. That's really, really important, because I think, you know, historically, we've been able to use flexible workers to fill gaps. Actually, what we're now doing is filling flexible workers to provide a big chunk of the workforce. So they are flexible, workers want stability, but they want flexibility. So actually let them book their flexible shifts for a number of weeks in advance. But we're having to really introduce that at a trust level, we're having to work with roster teams to allow that to feed straight into their rosters. So some of it is just about that. Some of it is simply making sure that they get access to the right training so that they can mobilise their skills around the system. And we saw that, you know, just for instance, Test and Trace was a really good example. So we had to put 10,000 clinicians on Test and Trace in its early days. But clinicians didn't know how to deal with call handling software, or log calls or, or trace contacts. So we had to be able to stand up training really, really quickly and allow the existing staff to adapt their skills, and work in these newly created roles. And you know, we're only going to get more of those aren't we as the system starts to come together, we're going to create these new roles, we're gonna have to train people into it, and then we're going to have to give them the flexibility to be able to do that train and move. So we're looking at mobility, we're looking at flexibility, we're looking at training.

Na'eem Ahmed (23:00)

And then going forward, you obviously have a great insight into all the organisations that NHSP are working with. So you've spoken about internally what you guys are doing but what do you think about organisations? What have they been doing really well, in terms of staff experience and wellbeing and getting that right?

Nicola McQueen (23:22)

Yeah, I mean, I think organisations throughout the NHS and wider healthcare sector are keen to make sure that they deliver the best staff experience, and everybody has got staff retention at the forefront of their mind when thinking about experience. But what I think we have to remember is that the whole system is focused on patient experience. And that's really important to our workforce. So and you know, you see that, don't you through the NHS survey questions, you see it just watching NHS staff go about their daily jobs. And I've spoken to sort of many leaders across the service, and they tell me very proudly, actually, about the lengths that their staff go to in order to deliver the best patient experience. But that doesn't always leave a lot of time for staff to focus on themselves take advantage of wellbeing, training initiatives. And you guys know better than most people, you need to be able to engage this workforce now to improve and that's to improve things for them, but to improve things for the patients.

And you see that through all of the work that we see going on across ImproveWell, but the staff already know what they want. They already know how to improve things. And we just now need to give them a voice. And I think that engagement, that you know making sure that we're addressing staff experiences, just more important than ever now.

Na'eem Ahmed (24:55)

What do you think the top few things might be that they would be, they would want or they would ask their leaders for? If you had your ear to the ground, and what would you say?

Nicola McQueen (25:06)

It's a good question. We asked this actually very formally of our bank members. And we said, what are the things that are important to you, there was five main themes in that. So the first one was about a culture of compassion and inclusivity. And, and that's particularly important when you think about flexible workforce, because they still want to be included, they want to be included in the staff survey that goes around at their end trust, they want to be part of the improvement programmes, they want to feed in. So they want a voice and they want to be included. The second bit was about, you know, this flexibility, and making sure that they can have these longer lines of work in to be included with their flexible working patterns. The third thing was about having a safe pair of hands. So, that was making sure that they were safely inducted, that their skills continued to be enhanced through training, that there was more predictability about where flexible workers were going to be needed around a system rather than short term. And, and that sort of sense of belonging, and it worked in an environment that they knew how to operate in, that was really important. And then that led into another thing, which we call 'sweat the small stuff'. And that's little things like when you're sending people out to work on a ward that they might not have been in before. Where do they go? Who do they meet? Where do they park? What do they wear? You know, putting things in place about, you know, small little buddy systems to help bring people into the environment. And there was a real sense of sweat that small stuff, because it was important.

Na'eem Ahmed (26:52)

And on that, thinking ahead. How do you see, I guess, we've seen the NHS recovery plan being published. And, you know, the ongoing conversation, which is the right conversation is about workforce, workforce numbers, etc. What do you see in terms of the future of the workforce? What it might look like, trends? And, you know, I know that's a million, billion dollar question. Right, but, what are your views in terms of the shape of the workforce? I guess?

Nicola McQueen (27:26)

Yeah. And I mean, it is, it is the billion dollar question right now, isn't it? but there's a few things for me that that are very obvious one is, we've got a labour shortage, a labour shortage and a labour shortage to deal with. And some of that is right here, right now, not enough clinicians across our service. And we need to make sure that we can keep as many of them for as long as we can. So there's a whole piece around retention. There's a whole piece about embracing and being able to bring in international nurses that can deliver for us today. And then there's the continuation of all of the training mechanisms and the gateway programmes to bring new resources in. And the thing is, for me is, it's a game of inches, there isn't any silver bullets, you know that? And you hear it, don't you? What is the thing that's going to make the difference in workforce. And, for me, it's lots and lots of things, continuing at a fast pace. We've got to continue to put money into development and making sure that we can retrain existing workforce into new skills and move them around the system where it's most required.

And yeah, so for me, this is a whole myriad of things that we have to do. And we have to do well, and we can't stop any one of them right now, because the trends over the next number of years are very, very clear. And that is labour short. And, you know, recovery, like you say, there's going to be that we've seen the targets come out in recent days, around what waiting lists are going to look like that is going to put continuous pressure on workforce in the NHS. So what we've seen over the pandemic, where we've seen demand, Jump up 10-15%. For us, that's just the new normal now, and that's not going to go away. So it's not about peak and trough for us. This is about a continuation of higher demand than resources available, and putting the people in the right places where it counts.

Na'eem Ahmed (29:23)

Brilliant. And I guess my last question is, I think, you know, you use the level of knowledge, understanding and depth of yourself and, you know, knowing about the NHS workforce, but if you could just tell our listeners a bit about your own journey. I mean, how you ended up as Chief Exec of NHSP. It'll be great to great to know that as well.

Nicola McQueen (29:52)

Yeah, okay. It wasn't it wasn't particularly planned, actually. So, so I spent 20 years in workforce running various businesses that delivered skills and staffing into multiple sectors. But it was always in the private sector, but often delivering into public sector services, but never healthcare. And I remember getting a call with the new chairman that was appointed, actually NHS Professionals. And he said, Nicola this is recruitment business. Is there anything that you can share with me about how do we scale up workforce? And as it happened, I came in just as a short stint, actually, as the COO, and I had a very clear remit, 10 months, what does this business do? How could it scale for the future? What role could it play in the system? And I delivered that plan to the board and they said, Would you put your hat in the ring for the chief executive job here? And I knew that that was going to be a question that I was going to be asked. So actually, in my 10 months as COO, I was doing my own diligence on the company, actually, and the system. And I've got to be honest, I just completely fell in love with it. Because the purpose is so strong. This is arguably the biggest workforce challenge that the UK has. It's one of the largest employers in the world. And, you know, this is a very responsible job to make sure that we can get this workforce mobilised, looked after, and supported, because it's for the benefit of them and the system, but it's for the benefit of the country. And that probably sounds really cheesy, but it genuinely, that's what resonated with me. And that's what keeps me motivated every day.

Lara Mott (31:48)

Yeah, it's great. It's great when you see your work making an impact. I mean, I think that's something that everybody ImproveWell, that's what motivates us. And we were so happy to be able to be in a position to help over the last couple of years, as part of the nation's response to the pandemic. It has been unbelievable watching how the various teams across the NHS have risen to the challenge and just kept going and kept going. And we thought it was, you know, months turning into the year turning into two years. I mean, you know, I think exactly as you say, Nicola, nobody's been able to plan long term, everybody just kept trying to make good decisions every week, and keep putting one foot in front of the other. And now, you know, this year, we've certainly seen a huge focus on workforce wellbeing, which is great, I think it's always been there, you know, there's always been the staff survey and, you know, staff engagement, giving some voice has always been a priority, but I think now it's the number one priority, let's say, of the 10 priorities or war that are probably going on at any one given time. So that's really comforting, and where we're really pleased to be in that line of work, because you can see that you are genuinely making a difference.

(33:09)

So Nicola, you may have heard, we have a section on our podcast, which we like to call, 'small but mighty', which might be showcasing an idea that has been suggested by one of our frontline colleagues, using the ImproveWell solution that might, on the surface, appear to be a small change, but has a significant impact. And so we sometimes just ask our guests, if they have come across, perhaps a small but mighty idea that you've heard in your own organisation, or you've implemented or something that you're particularly proud of, over the last few months, we would love to hear your small but mighty thoughts.

Nicola McQueen (33:51)

Yeah, and you know what, I love that, because it always is something very, very trivial, that people often don't want to put their hands up as an idea that have such a big company impact. So for me, it is about listening to the frontline because they know what the small things are, that will make the biggest difference. And you need to give them a voice and you need to empower them to make a change. And for me, that's where that magic happens. And we've had a whole variety of things around. Staff asking for a callback mechanism on our phone system, because we operate our call centre 24/7. But there's limited resources overnight, clinicians work multiple hours. So we wanted to be able to have just the ability of during the day when we've got you know, maximum call operatives available to be able to call people back and we're just really, really small but it became really, really mighty that people would be able to leave a message and say, 'I'm calling because I want to understand about shift at such and such. Can somebody call me back?'. And then they just can take that out of their mind and think about it again. And someone will call them back the next day. And that took a load of frustration out of people holding on the phone to try and get through to somebody. And actually, they just wanted a call back. So there's a whole variety of things, and they are always small but mighty. And I think the big, big thing is we've got to try and find a way of continuing to listen to the small.

(35:30)

The Improver is a production of ImproveWell limited. Thank you to today's guest, Nicola McQueen. To find out more about the ImproveWell solution, visit improvewell.com. Subscribe to The Improver at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you're listening.