



Health Transformation Plan and Internal Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Introduction & Background: Iran Health Transformation Plan was designed and implemented in 2014 to improve access and quality of public hospital services and reduce patients' out of pockets. Policy makers should consider both employees' and customers' needs to achieve long term positive outcomes. The HTP implementation increased patients' referrals to governmental hospitals and consequently increased their staffs' workloads. This study aimed to identify internal marketing factors affecting successful HTP implementation.

Materials & Methods: This qualitative study was conducted in 2017. Study population was the managers and workers of teaching hospitals of Tehran city, Iran. Sampling was done purposefully and with maximum variety (N=62). The data was gathered by semi-structured in-depth interviews and was analyzed by content analysis method using the MAXQDA11 software.

Results: The HTP had focused on external marketing and the internal marketing is almost neglected. Empowerment, job motivation, and effective communications have great roles in enforcing the internal marketing. Empowerment includes the feeling worthwhile and effective, and training. Job motivation includes proper physical environment, having required facilities and technologies, appropriateness of professionals with workload, rule of laws and regulations, job security, employee participation, perceived organizational support, career promotion, and salary. Effective communication includes decreasing the power distance, easy access of the workers to the managers, and active feedback.

Conclusion: This study identify internal marketing factors affecting successful HTP implementation. Health system policy makers and managers may increase the customer-oriented behaviors of the health workforce by applying the internal marketing.

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INTRODUCTION

Health industry is faced with rapid changes of economic, social, medical technology, population transition and so on. Necessity of responding to these changes and the health needs of the population requires the health systems to

transform. Health system reforms are aiming to increase access to services, to improve quality of the services, and to reduce expenditures [1]. Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME) in Iran implemented the Health Transformation Plan (HTP) in April 2014 with three main goals: financial

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protection of patients, increasing equity in access to health services, and improving quality of the services for efficiency, productivity and equity. The HTP in the treatment dimension included seven components: decreasing out-of-pocket payments of inpatients in public hospitals, supporting physician stay in poor and less-developed areas, assuring the presence of specialist physicians in public hospitals, improving the quality of hoteling services of hospitals, improving the quality of inpatient visits in public hospitals, promoting the natural vaginal delivery, and specifically financial support for patients with refractory diseases.

After implementation of the HTP, considering the reduced costs of therapies, referrals to the public hospitals and the bed occupancy rates increased dramatically and as a result, the workload of these hospitals increased without required changes in the infrastructures [2]. A previous study has showed cancer patients had low satisfaction level with the hospital services after the HTP [3]. Other negative effects of the HTP are increased induced demand, increased total therapeutic costs, and increased workload of public hospitals and increased dissatisfaction of their staff. Moreover, inefficient management of human resources is one of the main challenges of the HTP [4]. Thus a major guarantee for the HTP implementation is attention to hospital staff.

To succeed in health sector, it is inevitable for hospital managers to find the ways to get patient satisfaction. One major way for patient satisfaction is attention to hospital staff because loyal employees make customers satisfied and loyal [5]. In fact the workers are its internal customers and their satisfaction is an important factor in overall success of the hospital.

Marketing activities are performed to attract and maintain customers and to increase their loyalty to the organization. In this regard the human resource management tries to increase commitment, job satisfaction, and trust of the internal customers. These activities are called internal marketing which was introduced by Barry in 1987 [6]. Internal marketing focuses on proper relations of the workers in all organizational levels. Then the two main approaches of work-orientation and customer-orientation appear for employees relations with the customers [7]. Rafiq and Ahmed provided one of the most comprehensive definitions for internal marketing: an organized effort similar to the marketing that tries to overcome organizational resistances on intended changes, to motivate the employees, and to coordinate and integrate the staff for effective implementation of strategies of customer satisfaction [8].

Several approaches have been used for internal marketing. One of these approaches is the Foreman

and Money's which consists of three elements: employee development, reward system, and presenting the vision [9]. Ahmed, Rafiq and Saad also stated that the internal marketing includes strategic rewards, internal communications, education and development, organizational structure, master leadership, physical environment, employee finding, selection and substitution, coordination of duties, incentive systems, empowerment, and operational/process changes [10].

Internal marketing is an appropriate strategy for effectiveness of group works [11], improving service quality [12], employee motivation [13], job satisfaction [14], organizational learning and organizational commitment [15]. Considering such important functions of the internal marketing, hospitals, which are the focal points of the HTP, need internal marketing efforts to make the human resources competent, committed, and ready for changes.

Although some studies have been conducted on internal marketing [16-18], with the best of our knowledge, none of them was related to the HTP. This study aimed at identifying the effective factors in internal marketing of the HTP in Iran. The results provide useful information for policy makers and managers of health sector of the country and also be a lesson for other countries that going to implement such reforms.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted in 2017 by using semi-structured interviews with 62 participants from managers and staff of nine public hospitals in Tehran. Number of interviews in each hospital ranged from 4 to 10 which were selected purposefully and with maximum variety. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide which was developed based on study purposes. The interviews lasted for 46 minutes in average and range of 38 to 86 minutes. The participants are mentioned with P in this paper and their statements are quoted here in Italics.

The interviews were transcribed and then read several times. The content analysis method was used for analysis of the data with MAXQDA11 software. Each interview was analyzed separately to extract the main factors and then the final positions of the factors were determined by discussion of the research team [19]. To assure the acceptability of the data the summarized findings were checked with some participants.

Researchers of this study tried to increase the data validity by several techniques: long contact with study environment, spending sufficient time for interviews, examining the issue from several points of view and maximum variety sampling, expert confirmation of the study process, and participant

confirmation of the findings. Moreover, some activities were performed to increase neutrality of the study including conducting pilot interviews, exact description of interview method, constant comparison of the findings, and gathering as much as possible data and evidence. Finally the interviewer was aware not to induce his opinions to the participants.

As ethical issues, approval of the Ethics Committee was obtained from the three medical universities of Tehran city to which the hospitals affiliate: Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran University of Medical Sciences and Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences. Study purposes were explained to the participants and they were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Relation of the interviewer and the participants were friendly and informal thus they were able to state their opinions without stress

RESULTS

Majority of the participants were female (66.1%), and having a BSc degree (74.2%). Average age of them was 41.5 years and average working history of 16.3 years. Demographic data of the participants are presented in (Table 1).

Influencing factors on internal marketing of the HTP were divided into three categories: empowerment, job motivation, and effective communications. For the mentioned three main themes, there were 13 sub-themes which are shown in (Table 2).

Empowerment

To confront the changes and to provide proper responses to them, hospitals need capable workers. Empowerment is performed in two main areas of psychology and skill. It deals with working experience, job nature, and the beliefs that the employees have on their job in the hospital. This theme is consisted of two sub-themes of "feeling worthwhile and effective" and "employee training". Hospital employees have especial attention to the management decisions on them and their colleagues. A clinical supervisor in a hospital stated that "On the feeling worthwhile, when the words of a physician worth more than other staff, what do you feel? Unfortunately, lack of such feeling worthwhileness goes back to our education system in the universities. Students of Medicine receive more attention than other fields and as a result, when they graduate some of them underestimate the importance of non-clinical works of units such as medical records and environmental health" (P42). The feeling of worthwhileness of the hospital employees in the HTP and any other plan comes when all workers, from the security in the front door to the highest positions, feel themselves

effective and receive attention. A cleaning staff of a hospital stated that "The head of our ward is a specialist physician and always says to me that your work is valuable for me. As I have a role in treatment of the patients, your cleaning work is necessary too and completes my therapy work. Surely such behavior of the heads and chairmen makes the employee feel worthwhile" (P22).

Training the employees on the HTP causes them to do their activities effectively and thus increase efficiency. A hospital manager stated "The ADKAR model should be followed in the HTP" (P11). The ADKAR model is for change management and includes five steps of: awareness of the employees, desire to participate and support the plan, knowledge about the plan, ability during and after the plan with purpose of maintaining the HTP [20]. A nursing manager of hospital stated: "The employees need justification beside awareness. They must be assured that responsibility and responsiveness, financial resources, reward system, and proper procedures and technologies are seen for the HTP. But instead, they always have been told that we had no financial resources, the plan goes to stop, and so on. Surely every plan with such conditions will fail. All these statements affect the hospital employee function" (P48). According to the participants, due to the poor education before the plan, new instructions and efforts are needed for better implementation of the HTP.

Job Motivation

One important factor that affects the employee productivity is the job motivation. This theme includes eight sub-themes of proper physical environment, required facilities and technology, Appropriateness of number of professionals and workload, Assuring laws and regulations, Job security, Employee participation, Perceived organizational support, Career promotion, and Salary.

Considering the increased work load with the HTP, the physical environment, facilities and technologies can affect the employee work. A hospital administrative worker stated that: "I work most day hours in the hospital trying to provide services for the patients. I expect the working environment to be favorable and free of anxiety. And in terms of technology, we need to act with a high speed, regarding the high volume of the patients" (P43).

Appropriateness of number of professionals and workload was another factor identified in this study to influence the internal marketing of the HTP. A vice-chancellor of education in a hospital stated that: "Since one goal of the HTP is to increase the quality of health services, shortages of human resources in some hospital departments affect it. As

an example, we must have maximum benefit from the nurses in the clinical wards. And to do so, the nurse-bed ratio should be maintained with regard to the work load of each ward and along with the pay-for-performance system" (P15). A quality improvement officer of hospital mentioned that "The Ministry of Health emphasize about the service quality in all plans. Although the workload of the hospital has increased after HTP, no changes have occurred in human resources of the hospitals and if new staff is employed, then the distribution was not fair. The solution, which is successfully implemented in some hospitals, is the pay-for-performance. In this way the surplus employees can be identified and then moved to where they are needed" (P16).

An important pre-requisite for success of any plan is assuring the laws and regulations. Rule of relations instead of regulations has become an organizational illness which is violating the employee rights. A head nurse stated that: "Why in the HTP and any other plans of the Ministry the physicians have no responsibility and all responsibilities go to the nurses? And if a physician do a wrong or negligence to a patient, it depends on his/her relation with the higher levels to lobby" (P34). A worker of hospital logistics stated that: "If you are in the team of your boss and do flattery, you will have good work conditions and job promotion. There was a co-worker of mine who was selected as example employee just by relations not by regulations. He was often absent from the hospital and when he was in the hospital he just did spy on the employees. Unfortunately such employees are not few in our organizations" (P54).

Another issue of the job motivation is the job security. Job security catches most emotional energy of the employees. Job security is not only the employment contract but also, considering the changing condition of the organizations, it is achieved by continuous training. Most participants in one of the hospitals of Tehran stated that the hospital high officials are trying to keep them in top in terms of technical ability, working experience, organizational behavior, communication, thinking, and working conscience so that the job security of them be assured. This makes the employees to be in peace mentally and use all their mental and physical capacity for their work in the hospital.

The next factor to influence the internal marketing was the employee participation which reduces the resistance against the changes. A nurse stated that: "If they had asked for opinions of the employees when developing the HTP the plan would have better implementation" (P25). The purpose of employee participation is to encourage them for more commitment and involvement towards organizational success. A hospital employee stated that: "This participation makes me feel that my

opinions, thoughts, and viewpoints are valuable for the hospital and its managerial team" (P1).

Perceived organizational support is the other factor identified to influence the internal marketing. When the employees are loyal to the hospital they expect that the hospital be supportive to them and their families besides the tangible and intangible rewards. The participants told the story of an employee who had worked for the hospital for several years and when he got a cancer disease, the hospital did not support him and the situation was so hard for him and his family. A young co-worker of him stated that: "When I see my co-worker who had such history of work commitment that had received no support from the hospital, it is obvious that I will not get involved in the tasks. Instead, I will think of my health and comfort and I will not accept further responsibility. And in case of the HTP, why should I accept such stress and workload? I will do the works indifferently" (P18).

The next sub-theme was the career promotion which can be in the form of job enrichment and job rotation. The purpose of career promotion is to encourage the committed and responsible employees to maintain his/her working mentality and to make other employees motivated and striving. The manager of a public hospital in Tehran believed that: "Regarding the high workload in the HTP, we made a team of human resource management department and heads of other departments to make all the employees feel no stress about the new situation by correct managerial methods. We also tried to reinforce their sense of organizational identity by job rotation and job enrichment" (P27). There should be no sense of gender discrimination in the career promotion in hospital. An administrative manager in a hospital stated that: "The ideas like that the men have less work commitment or women will not be successful in management positions, will not help the performance of the hospital. Measures of performance should be fair for all employees and away from the gender discrimination or ethnic or religious considerations" (P28).

Salary was the last item in the theme of motivation. Decisions of the hospital management on reimbursement of its employees should be based on evidence and on the performance-based instructions. A head nurse stated that: "Since the HTP increased the workload of the employees, especially the clinical workers, the bonus of the nurses often exceed the head nurse's in this hospital because the hospital has a checklist to assess the performance of the employees, number of work shifts he/she had in month, how was his/her performance and so on. It is clear for all personnel that why the bonus of head nurse is less than nurse" (P57). Moreover, performance of all employees should be considered at the same way. A

physiotherapist stated that: "In the HTP, nobody considers that some employees are working hard for the success of the plan. Hospital management has no regard to the non-physician employees and their performance. Good and bad [employees] are the same in this hospital" (P3).

Effective communications

Effective communications have an important role in employee satisfaction and their participation in the organization. The elements of effective communication are, as identified in this study: decrease of power distance, easy access of the workers to the managers, and active feedback.

A factor which is emphasized several times in this study was the power distance in the hospital. Hospitals have a large power distance, various degrees of inequity exist among the employees, and the power is in hands of a specific team in the hospital. An employee in the accounting department of a hospital believed that: "The viewpoint in the hospital is classified in which physicians are at the upper class, nurses are middle-class, and the other employees are at the lower class. The evidence for this statement of mine is the [different] amount of attention that each class receives. But in fact we are like a family. Attention to the children creates their personal independence and makes them be self-confident in doing their works in the organization" (P56).

Easy communication of the employees with various levels of managers to provide comments and critiques is a factor that results in organizational development. A facilitator of hospital committees stated that: "Pattern of most hospitals is that always in the meetings of hospital committees and other meetings they bring people that look for good relations with colleagues instead of the constructive critiques. It seems that this method is liked by hospital managers and they use such people in the organization and in the meetings to hear fewer critiques" (P61). The other finding was that the definition of easy access to managers is not understood correctly. It is ascertained only when the communication starts from the employees, not from the managers. An educational supervisor of hospital stated that: "In the hospital's committees we try to invite an employee of the related unit/ward beside the head of the unit/ward to benefit from the viewpoints and comments of the employees [not only those of the heads of the units/wards]. This also leads to better communication of the employees and the hospital management team" (P53).

Use of active feedback in the work processes and organizational communications directly reduces the misunderstandings and carelessness. A paraclinic employee of a hospital stated that: "In

addition to the need of hospital employees for awareness and education about the HTP, they need to know how to act and they need to receive periodic regular feedback from their direct supervisor so that they could remove the weaknesses and try to continuously improve the processes" (P39). In such circumstances the expectation of performance improvement and success of the HTP will be a realistic expectation.

DISCUSSION

This study is conducted with the aim of identifying the influencing factors of internal marketing in the HTP of Iran. Due to the decreased out-of-pocket payments of the patients in public hospitals after implementation of the HTP, referrals to these hospitals increased considerably. Such increased workload without corresponding increase in workforce of the hospitals led to pressure on the hospital workers.

Internal marketing is a main strategy for service providing organizations such as hospitals because provision of the services effectively and efficiently requires motivated and customer-oriented employees. Success of the plans like the HTP that are implemented in a top-down manner from the Ministry of Health to the hospitals needs an attention to the hospital employees as they are the most valuable wealth of the hospitals. This study investigated the factors that are involved in internal marketing of the HTP from the viewpoints of the hospital workers and the main findings were: empowerment, job motivation, and effective communication.

Empowerment is a tool which facilitates the motivated behavior and increases the employee productivity [21]. Hospital employees not only can feel worthwhile, but also can feel that they are effective in achieving strategic and operational goals of the hospital. Ali in a study found that empowering the employees and delegation of authority to them makes them feel worthwhile and effective and impacts the quality of the services [22]. These results are attained only when you use knowledge, information, skills and capabilities to make the employees feel that their time and efforts is valuable for the hospital. Those organizations that emphasize on education of the employees benefit from creativity and success in making effective evolutions and interaction with their social environment [23].

Motivation is an important tool to attain the goals effectively and efficiently, to create a positive work environment, and to successfully implement the plans [24]. Bastani et al. found that after the implementation of the HTP the performance indicators of the hospitals were not desirable in hospitals affiliated to the Shiraz University of

Medical Sciences [25]. Physical environment, facilities and technologies may affect the satisfaction of the hospital workers. In a study in hospitals of Bushehr city, Iran it was found that despite the improvement in hoteling and the physical environment, the nurses had low satisfaction because of old equipment and shortages of instruments due to increased workload after the HTP [26].

Since one main goal of the HTP is to improve the quality of the therapeutic services, shortage of manpower in some parts of the hospitals may affect it. For example, the nurse-to-bed ratio should be observed in work shifts based on the volume of the works and the type of the ward and it should be maintained by pay-for-performance. The study of Rahimnia and Aref found that the direct and indirect effects of internal marketing were related with organizational commitment, job rotation, and intention to leave among the nurses [27]. Nakhaee et al. reported that 56% of the nurses in Birjand University of medical sciences hospitals are dissatisfied with their working conditions [28]. It seems that there is need for a fundamental reform in managerial structure of the hospitals in Iran to make previous reforms really come true; the reforms that have remained just as words such as regulations instead of relations, pay-for-performance and so on.

Mirfarhadi and colleagues in a study on job satisfaction of nurses found that those who are hired (for lifetime) have higher job security and peace than those whose contract is time-bounded [29]. Job enrichment leads to positive mental and emotional feelings of worthwhileness and meaningfulness and thus social organizational behaviors such as trans-role cooperation, help, double effort, and so on [30]. Despite all the advantages of the HTP for the society, if the hospital workers receive no support from the management, they cannot provide the services effectively and they gradually become indifferent towards the works and finally depersonalized. A study by Arab et al. showed that there is a correlation between depersonalization among nurses and the leadership and support of the nursing management in the hospital [31]. Working environment of the hospital can affect the physical and mental condition of the workers and thus the quality of the services. The employees, in return for their loyalty to hospital, expect tangible (payment and promotion) and intangible (respect, desirable working condition) rewards [32].

Study on effectiveness of the manager-employee communications and its effect of job commitment it was found that effective communication is a predictive factor for organizational commitment [33]. Communications can also lead to increased ability of the employees to participate in the works

[34]. The power distance of the manager and employee can be reduced by two-sided respect and confidence of them and then facilitate their communication. Previous studies have shown the manager-employee relations to be effective in productivity, reduction in absence, innovation and service quality [35]. On the other hand, receiving active feedbacks by the employees from all organization levels makes them be more confident about the judgments and the success of the works. Feedback is also related with organizational performance. Nyhan reported employee participation, providing them with feedback, asking them for feedback, and empowering them are the necessary activities to increase the trust in the organizations [36].

CONCLUSION

This study applied qualitative approach and content analysis method to identify the factors of internal marketing in the HTP of Iran. Undoubtedly, success and continuity of any plan needs the attention to the hospital employees beside the satisfaction of the patients. According to the findings of this study it is suggested that the employee empowerment, job motivation, and effective communications be strengthened in the hospitals.

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CONFLICT OF INTREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Variables		Frequency (N)	Relative frequency (%)
Sex	Male	21	33.87%
	Female	41	66.13%
Education level	BSc	46	74.2%
	MSc	9	14.5%
	Doctorate	7	11.3%
Age (years)	≤30	3	4.84%
	31-35	6	9.68%
	36-40	12	19.35%
	41-45	22	35.48%
	46-50	11	17.74%
Working history (years)	≥51	8	12.91%
	1-5	4	6.45%
	6-10	9	14.52%
	11-15	10	16.13%
	16-20	21	33.87%
	21-25	9	14.52%
	26-30	7	11.29%
≥31	2	3.22%	

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes of internal marketing factors affecting successful HTP implementation, Iran.

Main themes	Sub-themes
Empowerment	Feeling worthwhile and effective
	Employee training
Job motivation	Proper physical environment, required facilities and technology
	Appropriateness of number of professionals and workload
	Assuring laws and regulations
	Job security
	Employee participation
	Perceived organizational support
	Career promotion

	Salary
Effective communications	Decrease of power distance
	Easy access of the workers to the managers
	Active feedback