

How One Rural Healthcare System is Translating Technology Investments into Value





Michael Yost
Executive vice president & CHRO at Great River Health System

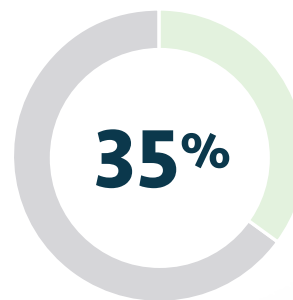
With more than a decade in healthcare human resources, Michael Yost knows the unprecedented challenges facing healthcare leaders today. According to Yost, staffing shortages and rising labor costs are among the foremost struggles forcing healthcare leaders to think in new ways and be innovative in an industry that for decades has been resistant to change. For Yost, shaping the organization’s human resource strategies and building Great River’s reputation as a provider and an employer of choice means thinking boldly, leveraging data analytics, and integrating the latest workforce management technologies.

For the past year, amid a rapidly changing industry, Yost has served as executive vice president and chief human resource officer (CHRO) at Great River Health System. Great River is a 125-year-old rural independent health system serving residents of southeast Iowa, west-central Illinois, and northeast Missouri. Great River’s mission to empower its 2,500+ people to provide compassionate, high-quality care while being good stewards of its resources guides Yost’s leadership.

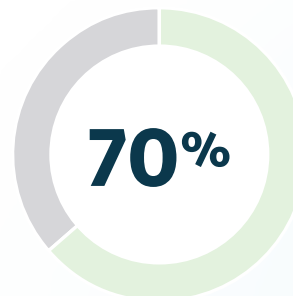
HR Challenges Unique to Remote Areas

Small rural hospitals, which represent [35% of all community hospitals](#) in the country, are the cornerstone of most, or all, of the healthcare services in the communities they serve. They contribute significantly to overall community well-being and are critical components of communities across rural America. Yet, they are not immune to industry challenges. In fact, they face persistent workforce issues unique to remote areas.

The current ratio of patients to primary care physicians in rural areas is approximately 40 physicians per 100,000 people. Nearly 70% of [Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas](#) are in small towns and agricultural regions.



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Yost is charged with addressing talent shortages while taking into consideration the diverse motivations of new and existing multigenerational workers, including demands for flexibility and salary increases during a time when inflation is high and financial resources are strained. He is also helping to maintain Great River's financial sustainability and self-reliance so that the organization can remain independent and continue caring for family, friends, neighbors, and community.

"Recruiting and retaining clinical talent have always been especially difficult for rural healthcare providers," explains Yost. "Contributing factors include lower reimbursement rates, limited resources, lower patient volumes, and professional isolation."

"Despite these inherent obstacles, standing still is not an option for us," adds Yost. "Our patients and our community rely on us. We must be creative and adaptable and for us, implementing new technology solutions is a top priority."

Yost is not alone. According to [Gartner research](#), HR leaders ranked HR technology as the No. 1 area of investment in 2023 among all priorities, and 46% of HR leaders planned to increase investments in HR technology.

Great River Health System

- **Southeast Iowa Regional Medical Center**
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- **Henry County Health Center, Clinics in these Iowa locations:** Burlington, Fort Madison, Keokuk, Mediapolis, Mount Pleasant, New London, Wapello, Wayland, West Burlington, and Winfield
- **Heritage Family Pharmacy, Heritage Park Pharmacy and Heritage Partners Pharmacy**
- **Heritage Medical Equipment & Supplies**
- **Universal Therapy Group**

Unleashing the Power of Data

Says Yost, “Human resource leaders are not only solving HR problems; we are solving organization-wide issues. Our decisions impact the entire health system. We cannot silo ourselves. Successful HR outcomes are born from understanding the big picture trends across the entire organization – clinical, operational, and financial domains. Yost tells us that unleashing the power of data enables him to better anticipate, respond to, and mitigate negative trends and organizational turbulence weeks, months, and possibly years into the future. Yost goes on to say that it is data analytics that earns him the leadership support needed to make things happen.

Yost’s arrival at Great River Health required swift onboarding. He tells us that in the current unpredictable human resource environment, his ability to get up to speed quickly was paramount. Using data analytics, Yost was able to quickly assess the current staffing situation and understand what was going on. Looking through an objective, evidence-backed lens, Yost says his team can be intentional about who Great River is recruiting, how they are retaining talent and where they should be focusing their efforts.

As an example, Yost says,



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“We found that approximately 80% of our employee turnover happened in the first two years of joining our team. In addition to that, we looked at workforce planning data to help inform us of the skills that are and will continue to be in demand for the organization in the coming years. So that is where we are concentrating our recruitment and retention initiatives.”

Translating Investment Into Value

Competition for talent is fierce. Yost tells us that he is not just vying for nurses with other hospitals, he is also competing with nursing agencies. But he says that he hopes that will change soon. Yost is taking the decisive steps toward making Great River the employer and the vendor to eliminate the overhead and the staff resources needed to successfully manage third-party staffing agencies.

“External labor costs are a considerable concern,” notes Yost. “Not unlike our industry colleagues, we employ a substantial number of travel nurses. Today, we are implementing an internal resource pool (IRP) to operationalize and optimize efficiencies so that our spending translates to value for our employees, our patients, and our community. It is an important evolution of our staffing strategy and how we manage talent.”

Contract labor is a significant line item on every health systems’ annual budget. Currently, hospitals are spending approximately [63% more for travel RNs](#) than they did at the start of 2020.

Benefits of an Internal Resource Pool Powered by Einstein II

- **Optimize** and automate deployment, communication, and scheduling
- **Track** credential competencies, ensuring right resource, right place, right time
- **Drive** reduction in contract labor and fill open positions
- **Connect** with talent via mobile device, making communication and deployment seamless and attracting “gig economy” workforce

Great River Health has partnered with Hallmark to build an internal IRP using Hallmark's Einstein II platform. Great River has dubbed its new IRP Right Choice. Says Yost, "Right Choice helps us retain and recruit new, experienced nursing staff by providing enhanced and flexible scheduling options and implementing innovative technology designed to ensure deployment of the right staff to the right place at the right time. Right Choice nurses fill daily functional vacancies, census, or acuity increases, leaves of absence, FTE vacancies, overtime replacement, and agency utilization among other needs.

"Great River Health is a terrific partner," says Jennifer Firmalan, MSN, RN, CCWP, vice president at Hallmark. "Great River came to us challenged by staffing shortages and budget constraints and bogged down by labor-intensive third-party staffing agency management tasks. We are confident that together, we can reduce costs, free up the valuable time of nursing, human resource and finance teams and help Great River remain an independent, preferred employer."

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a tech-enabled IRP can be transformative.”

Yost explained. "While a data base of skilled flexible talent is not a new idea, the Einstein II tech-enabled IRP can be transformative." The goal of the program is to significantly reduce reliance on external agencies and travelers to support staffing needs, be an additional layer of support to fill core scheduling gaps including daily functional vacancies, long-term needs, and improve the nursing and patient experience and the quality of care at Great River Health.

Additionally, the IRP helps to eliminate the resources needed to manage staffing agency vendors or hire a managed services provider (MSP). Right Choice makes Great River both the employer and staffing agency while saving fiscal and talent resources.

“Housing an internal nurse pool ensures consistency in quality nurses who are familiar with the hospital values, mission, practices, and standards, and each other,” explains Yost. “As a result, we enjoy the benefits of enhanced teamwork and a culture of inclusivity. It’s not full-time staff versus part-time agency staff.”

“In the future we plan to expand Right Choice to include other clinical staffing opportunities. Further, if we end up with surplus flexible staff, we hope to lend a helping hand and share talent with other rural health systems in our region.

Looking to Tomorrow

“While we would love to get to the point where we do not have to employ outside staffing agencies, we are not there yet. But that is the goal,” says Yost. In the meantime, Yost and his team are also focused on building a pipeline of future talent to one day become a Great River full time, part time, or Right Choice employee.

“Our rural location means that we are really the only healthcare provider for many miles. Professional isolation is not a selling point when it comes to recruitment. Hence, a major focus for us is developing a local talent pipeline – not just for today but for tomorrow and for many years to come. Convincing talent to relocate is far more difficult than nurturing local talent who understand the community, our needs, and our patients. To that end, we are investing in numerous education and training initiatives through collaboration with our local colleges and high schools.”

Great River Health Community Outreach

Local High School Students

- Health career workshops
- Job shadowing
- Scholarships for students pursuing a career in healthcare

Local College and University Students

- Clinical rotation
- Internships
- Observation requirement experience
- Scholarships for students pursuing a career in healthcare

The Future is Bright

Yost says Great River is making smart investments in technology today to help build a happier, more engaged workforce. This translates to better care, services and employee and patient experiences. If the goal is to strengthen its position as an employer and a provider of choice, Great River is well on its way.



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