



# Permanently Captivating and Binding the Scarce Nurse Through Happiness at Work

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## The implementation of job differentiation is full of pitfalls

- Are your nurses running away to other organisations?
- Are you demanding too much from nurses in job vacancies?
- When was the last time you truly invested in the motivation of your nurses?
- Is job differentiation a vague concept or the holy grail for happy nurses?

In this article I will describe why job differentiation could be the 'holy grail' with which we can retain our scarce nurses. And which allows us to bring nurses back to healthcare. I will introduce you to the idea of job differentiation and share the pitfalls I have encountered in its implementation.

I have often wondered how it is possible that something as practical, useful, simple and valuable as continuing to engage and retain nurses has been given such a boring name: **"Job Differentiation"**. If we referred to it as 'nursing happiness at work' it would have been successful around the globe without a doubt!

*Job differentiation is the set of resources employed to expand the tasks and responsibilities within a job and the job profile that goes with it, to make the job more challenging and appealing for the employee.*

A rough translation for the uninitiated: in many healthcare organisations, it makes little difference whether nurses have Inservice, vocational or higher professional education. They do about the same tasks and are paid almost the same. This has created a gap between what they learn at school and what they can apply in practice. For example, higher professional education may include the 'clinical reasoning' course, but the trained nurse has little or no time for this in practice. The (healthy) idea behind job differentiation is that nurses are deployed for what they have been trained for. And this is desperately needed.

Everyone is familiar with major staff shortages. Healthcare is said to be the unhealthiest sector to work in, with an absenteeism due to illness rate of 6.7% and a turnover of 15% (source: [Intermediair](#)). According to the [Stichting Arbeidsmarkt Ziekenhuizen](#), the lack of career prospects and opportunities is an important reason for departure.

Moreover, the sector is becoming increasingly complex and requires a different approach. This is why job differentiation has been a hot topic since 2010.

As a professional in talent development and an organisational advisor, I have helped shape many job differentiation processes. Despite the boring name, I am enthusiastic about it. In fact, I regard job differentiation as the solution for the sustainable connection of nurses to organisations. Job differentiation is an important tool to bring back the thousands of nurses who have left healthcare in recent years.

## Differentiating On the Basis of Education Alone Is a Big Mistake

Let me get straight to the point: differentiating based on education alone is a big mistake. The focus on the difference in education level assumes that one's education level can be directly linked to the skills one possesses as a nurse. This assumption is incorrect.

The difference between vocational education and higher professional education nurses should then become visible in practice by having the former perform the same tasks and by assigning additional tasks to the latter. For example, think of the indication and organisation of care across the professional fields, Evidence Based Practice (including the implementation thereof), clinical reasoning, coaching, conducting practice-oriented research and clinical leadership (non hierarchical).

However, not all higher professional education nurses have developed in the areas above. At the same time, many nurses from vocational education have mastered parts of these disciplines over the years. After they complete basic training, many nurses continue to participate in education. This acquired knowledge, for example a specialisation in a nursing department, is insufficiently taken into account in today's landscape. Skills are constantly acquired in practice, both in work and in life.

One major example from practice are Inservice-trained nurses. They often have 25 years of experience or more. When they were younger, many opted for a practical solution of working and learning, in addition to keeping a family going. As a result, their professional and intellectual abilities have not been determined by a single study programme. It was a practical decision. Part of this group

has indeed developed and specialised, for example in information provision, palliative care, neurology, or has asserted themselves as valuable members of a Works Council. This once again demonstrates that it is not only one's education that determines one's skills.

Education level makes up only a small part of the difference between nurses. Acquired knowledge, (work/life) experience and skills play a significant role as well. The notion that there is more than education is increasingly supported. For example, the V&VN, a professional association for nurses, is of the opinion that differentiation should take place on the basis of education, competences and work experience (source: ['Nursing'](#) article).

### **Necessary Organisational Framework**

Another important pitfall in the implementation of job differentiation concerns the extent to which there are possibilities to differentiate at all. For instance, is the organisation actually ready to make the position of nurses more tailor-made (in terms of work schedule, for example)? Is management open to adapting the role? In practice, we see that nurses are able to take on more tasks, but that the basis ultimately remains the same. Nurses are happy to be deployed by management as generalists. By specialising more, there is a greater opportunity for customisation and nurses can be offered roles which continue to challenge them, because they match their wishes and ambitions. Adequate job differentiation must therefore be safeguarded by creating the right conditions! The job content must be adjusted, something which the organisation must be open to. Tasks should not be added, but previous tasks should be replaced.

A good example in this direction is the handbook ['Functie-creatie in de VVT'](#), which describes practical guidelines on how to deal creatively with the work that has to be performed.

### **Example 1. Practice in a hospital**

In recent months, I have been working on a large project for a hospital that is introducing job differentiation. To this end, a new position has been created: the 'Supervising Nurse'. The intention is to add 'extra tasks', such as Evidence Based Practice, to this position. The hospital has carefully taken a year to experiment and assign a mix of nurses to determine what works and what does not.

The higher professional education nurses are offered the position of Supervising Nurse. The vocationally trained nurses are given the opportunity, by following higher professional education study programmes, to still qualify for the position of Supervising Nurse, which has been designated a scale higher. A large group of Inservice-trained nurses, whose level of education has not been established, are tested through individual assessments. To fill in any gaps, there is provision for one year of development for each (prospective) Supervising Nurse.

The individual outcome for each nurse comes down to (1) 'Suitable to become a Supervising Nurse within a year' or (2) 'Not suitable for the position of Supervising Nurse'. It is

especially great to see that higher professional education nurses do not always choose to become a Supervising Nurse. This is because caring for patients directly makes them much happier. At the same time, there is also a varied group of nurses (of other education levels) who turn out to be 'suitable within one year'. In this group, some have turned out to be strong practical trainers, others moderate coaches (but strong in execution) and still others who 'want more variety' in their work.

### **Motivation Also Plays An Important Role**

Motivation also plays an important role in job differentiation. After all, questions such as 'where have I come from?', 'where am I now?' and 'what do I want my future to look like?' are crucial for all of us in determining our future. For many nurses (at least to the extent that I have witnessed), these are quite complicated (and exciting) questions to ask yourself after 25 years of executive nursing work.

In the coming year, the hospital - together with the group of Supervising Nurses - will be embarking on an intensive process. The nurses have been allowed to partly shape their roles. If a task is added, a number of hours will be assigned for this. The extra tasks will thus become 'instead of' tasks. In my view it is indeed advisable to allow the group to differentiate, so that they can choose that which suits their individual motivation and skills.

### **Example 2. Practice in nursing and care homes and home care**

In hospital care, people are currently working in several ways to implement job differentiation. In district nursing, at a number of mental health institutions and in nursing and care homes and home care, job differentiation has been a topic of discussion for much longer. For example, in nursing and care homes and home care, people speak of a so-called 'quality nurse', which I consider a form of job differentiation. This nurse is directly responsible for the specific care provided at different locations. In addition to being able to provide high-quality care oneself, being able to coach a team in terms of qualitative methodical work is a critical success factor. However, not infrequently have I encountered quality nurses who turned out to be less capable when it came to coaching; they preferred to do the tasks themselves instead. Setting priorities in all improvement proposals and influencing the environment to achieve them also proved to be difficult for a number of them. Similar to dual leadership in hospitals, these nurses must maintain quality of care alongside someone who focuses on business operations.

It barely needs to be explained that having skills, in addition to having higher professional education professional and intellectual abilities, is essential in shaping this position. This is of course different from actually having completed higher professional education!

## Why is individual development not taken into account more?

All these determining factors (motivation, experience, knowledge and skills) are not always equally well considered in the discussion about job differentiation. Why? Because it is complicated and requires a professional approach. And also attention (and eye) for the individual. Only once it has been carefully determined what an individual can and wants to be, AND when the organisation is ready for such an approach, can job differentiation be successfully implemented!

It is like a puzzle to be completed, as it were. In order to lay all the pieces, you must be able to observe and interpret behavioural skills. Subsequently, these must be associated with cognitive abilities, personality and motivation. Sometimes the answer is unambiguous, other times it is not at all. This makes it all the more difficult to make the right decisions. However, if one does all this properly and in close consultation, one is able to make decisions based on arguments that everyone understands and that everyone supports. This approach respects nurses and gives them the position they deserve as well as an appealing perspective.

## Differentiation Instead of Generalisation

If it were up to me, I would differentiate based on roles, which can then be combined. Including the accompanying reward. This provides perspective for both vocational education and higher professional education nurses. Of course, it is important to properly determine the criteria in advance and to test them accordingly.

It is essential to differentiate, for example on the basis of roles, in order to apply different talents and to offer nurses a perspective with which they can continue to work for a while.

## Differentiate Because You MUST, Not Because You CAN

The world is changing, including that of nurses. Within healthcare, there is a trend towards specialisation. For example, not every hospital provides all types of care and there are more and more specialised clinics. Hospitals are providing more and more complex care (read: multiple problems). This trend should continue towards

specialisation within the positions available in hospitals. It is essential for the organisation to remain critical or to seek critical advice. For example, what does it take to keep someone who wants to engage in projects but no longer wants to provide care? Or when a nursing department of a care home in the neighbourhood starts to use a ward in the hospital, just to name a few examples. Moving with the demands of society and employees is important to keep organising efficiently. Job differentiation is a necessary step in this.

## Expensive?

Deploying people in roles that suit them and that motivate them shows to save tens of thousands of euros in every survey. A mismatch costs at least € 10,000 according to the most conventional approaches. The costs of absenteeism are many times that. Investing in a solid way, in motivation, a good match and a suitable role, often costs between € 1,500 and € 2,500 per employee. In other words: to prevent is better than to cure.

## Conclusion

In the Netherlands, we do not have the luxury of rejecting people based on their education level. Moreover, this approach does not do professionals justice. We have a shortage of nurses and healthcare is becoming increasingly complex. We must focus on the talents that are available in a group of people who want to commit themselves to healthcare in the Netherlands.

It makes more sense to invest in nurses and to offer them a discussion partner with whom they can shape a future, which will give them more energy and enthusiasm. Nurses will benefit from in-depth research that analyses motivation, personality, cognitive capacities and behavioural skills. In this way, justice is done to nurses' actual skills.

One important condition for this is that there is the opportunity to develop within the organisation. That there are varied profiles and/or that there is room to shape these different profiles. Only then can we actually differentiate between the countless different roles that are part of the nursing profession. Only then can nurses be permanently connected to the healthcare organisation.

Interested in more information about Job Differentiation and how this can be applied in your own organisation? Please do not hesitate to contact us.



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## More information?

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