

Skill Mix 'How to' Guide

Why Do I need to know?

The outcomes of a skill-mix review connect with the demand side of planning as well as the supply side. On the demand side, skill-mix may be used to increase productivity levels to satisfy demand for improved levels of patient output. This results in a need for different numbers and levels of staff as well as for entirely new types of staff.

On the supply side, it can be used as a resourcing strategy to answer a supply problem, such as filling chronic vacancies, which are often caused by reliance on very scarce, highly qualified staff.

In terms of putting a skill-mix review into action, there may be a variety of contractual issues to sort out as well as clinical protocols. Changes will also result in training needs for the staff concerned.

Methods employed in a skill mix review

Typically, the evidence-gathering part of the exercise is based on the following steps:

- sample the activity, using a 'diary' to identify which task each member of staff is undertaking every 10 minutes or so (depending on the nature of the service being provided)
- group the activities into broad categories such as clinical care, administration and portering to show how staff spend their time
- once the data has been collected, analyse it for each type and grade of staff and compare it with their existing job descriptions. Particularly analyse the amount of direct patient care compared with administrative duties
- identify cross-over, duplication and delays. Mapping the tasks undertaken by each staff group onto a grid (spreadsheets can be used for this) helps to show duplications in quite a visual way

The information may be collected by giving staff self-completion diaries. Alternatively, someone deemed credible by the staff concerned may observe and record their activities. The advantage of the self-completed diaries is that staff feel more comfortable with them. However, it is difficult to complete diaries and care for patients at the same time, which means that when they are filled in retrospectively, errors can occur due to faulty recall. While using observers avoids this problem, staff can feel that they are being spied upon. Electronic notepads are now available to support activity recording, making self-recording somewhat easier.