



# Traits Of A Successful CNA

*A two-year study has identified nurse assistant functions that are critical to personal success and an effective performance on the job.*

**N**URSE ASSISTANTS, ORDERLIES, and attendants—also known by other job titles such as certified nurse assistant (CNA), nurse aide, psychiatric attendant, resident assistant, caregiver, and patient care assistant—are among the fastest growing, in-demand occupations in the country.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of nurse, psychiatric, and home health aides is projected to grow 28 percent by 2016—a much faster rate than for all other occupations. The need for nurse assistants alone will jump by more than 250,000 jobs, from 1.4 million in 2006 to 1.7 million by 2016.

What's more, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) estimate that the nation will need between 5.7 and 6.5 million nurses, nurse assistants, home health aides, and personal care workers by 2050.

In an area that is clearly high-growth, it is critical for employers to understand what skills are needed to be effective in the job.

DOL has supported the development of competency models by a number of industries. For most of them, the models take the general form shown in Figure 1 (page 62), with the most basic level being the personal characteristics an individual brings to the job, such as personality, interests, and values.

Moving up the pyramid are foundational skills; general industry knowledge and skills; specific industry knowledge, skills, and abilities; and specific job knowledge, skills, and abilities.

This article focuses on the broad



**Research has found that CNAs perform an average of 45 different tasks in their jobs.**

levels at the base of the model for the CNA. But in order to describe the personal characteristics and foundational skills that equip a CNA to succeed on the job, it is important to first understand what nurse assistants actually are expected to do.

## Critical CNA Tasks

To determine the most critical tasks performed by nurse assistants and the foundational skills and skill levels needed, ACT, Iowa City, Iowa, studied a sample of tasks and foundational job skill profiles for 23 nurse assistant jobs analyzed during the past two years.

This research resulted in the identification of an average of approximately 45 tasks per job.

Each task was rated by job incumbents and/or supervisors 1.) for its importance to the job and 2.) for the relative time spent on the task.

From these two ratings, the criticality of each task was determined and ranked according to its importance. Among those, the most critical 30 percent of each list were selected for further study.

Using a qualitative research technique, 13 major themes were identified

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as emerging from the tasks (see Figure 3, page 64).

Direct support, treatment, and training of patients accounted for about one-third of the focus of the tasks, with approximately another one-third of the focus falling into the categories of following procedures and policy guidelines; documenting and record-

ing actions and information; and taking measures, gathering data, and observing and analyzing patient information.

It is important to note that this is about the focus of the set of tasks and not about the time spent on the various activities or their importance.

It is fair to assume all of these elements are considered to be highly

critical areas, since the tasks they came from were screened to be in the top 30 percent of tasks in terms of criticality for each of the jobs analyzed.

### Foundational Skill Requirements

Through further analysis and input from job incumbents and/or supervisors, foundational skills and the skill levels required to successfully accomplish the

job tasks were identified. The five most important foundational skills that a successful nursing assistant needs are:

- Reading for information
- Locating and using information
- Observation skills
- Applied mathematics
- Writing

Under the reading for information skill, nurse assistants must be able to read, comprehend, and follow policies, procedures, and announcements; read materials that describe procedures that include several steps; determine the meaning of jargon, technical terms, abbreviations, or words that have several meanings by usage context; and follow directions involving conditional—if/then—statements.

In locating and using information, nurse assistants must be able to find and apply information contained in workplace graphics such as charts, order forms, diagrams, and instrument gauges.

Using the data found, nurse assistants may need to compare and summarize the information and identify trends based on the findings.

In terms of observation skills, nurse assistants need to pay attention to and remember the basic parts of straightforward procedures with some details that are difficult to notice. They must also concentrate on the important elements of a procedure and remain focused on relevant details when there are extra details or distractions as part of a procedure.

Nurse assistants are not generally required to understand statistics or higher level mathematics, but they must understand how to solve basic problems using a calculator or computer.

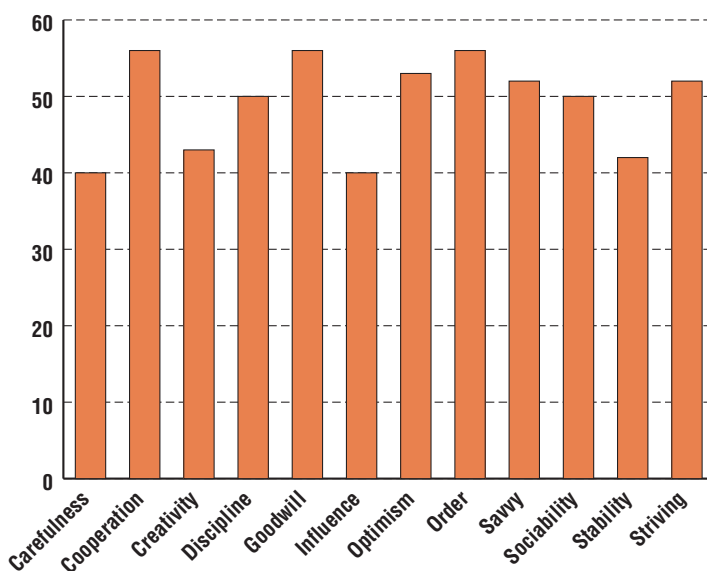
Nurse assistants may have to solve problems using fractions, decimals, or percentages or convert simple money or time units.

In writing, nurse assistants must be able to write clearly with few errors. Sentences should be complete and somewhat varied. Few mechanical,

Figure 1: Pyramid Of Competencies To Prepare For Success On The Job



Figure 2: LPN/Nurse Assistant Personality Facets Associated With Job Performance



Source: ACT research on facets of personality associated with job performance for the Talent personality characteristics assessment, 2008.

grammatical, or word usage errors should be present, and the message should be adequately conveyed. Style, tone, and language should be generally consistent with standard business English. The writing should be at least loosely organized and generally focused.

## Personality Traits

At the level of personal characteristics, ACT's research on personality facets that describe licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and nurse assistants also sheds light on what leads to success for CNAs. In a study of approximately 200 LPNs and nurse assistants, the

personality characteristics that were found to be strongest were: cooperation, goodwill, optimism, order, savvy, and determination/striving (see *Figure 2, page 62*).

Of course, this is not to imply that the other personality characteristics are unimportant or even less important. It points out the natural strengths that individuals in this occupation show and signals that persons inclined to enter the occupation may need to develop behavior patterns that could help them compensate in areas in which they have less of a natural strength.

Educators, trainers, and mentors working with individuals who want to

enter or advance in the nursing profession can help those individuals achieve more success by helping them to know themselves better and to develop their behavioral repertoire and foundational skills in preparation for mastering the tasks of the job.

The research offers some clear focus on what to look for and areas in which to provide support. For the aspiring student or employee, attending to their foundational skill sets can make the rest of learning the job much easier in the long run. And as the employee is more successful on the job, so too will the organization be more successful in delivering on its mission. ■

## Figure 3: What Nurse Assistants Actually Do

**F**ollowing is a list of 13 major themes found among the many tasks associated with CNA jobs, followed by examples that illustrate the actual tasks.

**1. Direct support, treatment, and training of patients.** Assist patients with personal care and comfort, such as bath, oral hygiene, grooming, elimination, and positioning, and help patients improve their ability to function more independently by providing training in various activities of daily living.

**2. Follow procedures and policy guidelines.** Maintain confidentiality regarding patients' medical, mental, and residency status and adhere to Health Information Accountability and Portability Act (HIPAA) guidelines and company policies.

**3. Take measures, gather data, observe, and analyze and interpret patient information.** Recognize changes in a patient's condition such as abnormal values in vital signs, intake, and output.

**4. Document and record actions and information.** Record completed tasks in charting system to document information and patient care.

**5. Maintain safety standards for patients and employees.** Use universal precautions when handling bodily fluids and properly clean or dispose of materials soiled by bodily fluids.

**6. Interact with patients and family in appropriate and supportive ways, and promote well-being.** Provide a customer-friendly environment by communicating in a professional and courteous manner with all age groups.

**7. Give feedback and information to other nursing and medical staff.** Keep registered nurses informed of patient status, and report changes immediately.

**8. Work with a team.** Work with co-workers to plan shifts to ensure that all needs are met and tasks accomplished.

**9. Use computer skills.** Enter patient data into patient documentation system, log on with password, verify patient, and log out.

**10. Maintain a professional appearance and demeanor.** Dress appropriately, maintain personal hygiene, and apply respectful communication skills with team members and customers.

**11. Conduct detailed work independently and efficiently.** Perform routine or repetitive tasks with proper care and attention.

**12. Continue personal development and training.** Maintain job competency through continued training and testing to meet certification requirements such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation or basic life support.

**13. Contend with and resolve conflicts.** Maintain ability to remain calm and in control during verbal and physical threats from customers and others.

Source: ACT