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Keywords Work–life balance/ Wellbeing/Rotas/Shift patterns

In this article...

- Why nurses and organisations have competing priorities for shift scheduling
- Nurses', managers' and hospital directors' views and experiences
- The impact of different conflict-management approach types

Negotiating the competing priorities in nurse shift scheduling

NIHR

We select NIHR-funded research studies that are most likely to inform and be of interest to health and care professionals, policy makers, patients and the public.

Key points

Unfavourable shift patterns cause work–life conflict, burnout and sickness absence among nurses

A study interviewed nurses, nurse managers and hospital directors about shift scheduling

Collaborative and compromising approaches to shift scheduling cause the least conflict

Important factors are predictability, flexibility, adequate rest and nurse engagement



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Abstract Globally, healthcare systems are losing nursing staff due to factors such as poor work–life balance. Shift scheduling is a point of conflict between organisations and nurses due to their differing priorities. In this qualitative study, interviews with nursing staff, managers and hospital directors revealed that collaborative, compromising approaches are the most effective way to prevent conflicts from escalating. By using these approaches to reasonably meet nurses' preferences, organisations can support individual wellbeing and organisational goals. Conversely, rigid policies and competing approaches often lead to conflict, low morale and staff turnover.

Citation Barker H (2026) Negotiating the competing priorities in nurse shift scheduling. *Nursing Times;* 122: 10.

The global nursing workforce is experiencing substantial challenges, including burnout, stress and absenteeism, which are intensified by unsafe staffing levels and poor working conditions (Buchan and Catton, 2023). In England, many nurses are considering leaving their jobs due to work–life imbalance (NHS Digital, 2025). Research shows a link between unfavourable shift patterns and a compromised work–life balance (Emmanuel et al, 2024; Karhula et al, 2018); as a result, healthcare organisations like the NHS face conflicts between achieving organisational targets and supporting staff wellbeing through appropriate work scheduling.

Previous research in a variety of fields has established a link between work schedule autonomy and employee wellbeing (Shifrin and Michel, 2022). Among nurses specifically, more scheduling choice has been associated with a decrease in sickness absence, burnout, turnover intentions (Dall'ora et al, 2023) and work–life conflict (Karhula et al, 2018). Emmanuel et al's (2024) study found that nurses' shift preferences were mainly related to non-work commitments, schedule predictability and flexibility.

To address a considerable gap in the literature, a 2025 National Institute of Health Research study by Barker et al explored how the competing priorities of nursing staff, nurse managers and hospital directors interact to influence shift-scheduling decisions; it sought to identify strategies to reconcile the conflicting priorities of individual wellbeing and organisational needs. That study is described in this article.

Method

The qualitative study used an interpretative approach and was guided by the 1974 Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which identifies five approaches to managing conflict:

- Collaborating;
- Compromising;
- Accommodating;
- Avoiding;
- Competing (APA PsycNet, no date).

Following advertisement via local research and development departments, participants self-selected for the study and offered informed consent.

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Data was collected in October-December 2023 through online semi-structured interviews with 17 nursing staff, five nurse managers and six hospital directors from five NHS trusts in England. The interviews explored experiences with shift patterns, wellbeing and work–life balance; they were transcribed, and the data was then analysed using framework analysis. Data collection continued until no new ideas surfaced in nursing staff's responses.

The themes were collaboratively developed, ensuring a clear audit trail from codes to the original transcripts, then presented to nurse leaders from the participating trusts to confirm whether they resonated with their experiences.

Results

The study identified three main themes, which are discussed below.

Balancing choice with consistency, predictability and flexibility

Nursing staff highly valued having a consistent shift pattern that aligned with their personal preferences, along with predictability and flexibility. When nurses advocated for their personal needs related to external constraints and organisations failed to accommodate them, it led to staff turnover. Predictability in scheduling – by rosters being released well in advance – was a collaborative approach that benefited:

- Nurses in terms of personal planning;
- Organisations via operational efficiency.

Managers who used an accommodating approach to create rosters by prioritising staff preferences saw improved satisfaction and reduced sickness rates. They said organisational approaches were shifting towards this, rather than competing strategies, due to the labour shortage:

> *"We didn't have night-shifts-only contracts – it was not allowed – but now we have softened... We've got to go with what individuals want, rather than it to be what the organisation wants. We're in a buyers' market."*

Adequate rest

All participants agreed that sufficient rest between shifts was crucial, due to the demanding nature of nursing. Conflict arose when rosters prevented adequate recovery, particularly with too many consecutive shifts. For example, when managers scheduled consecutive shifts without adequate breaks, this was seen as a competing approach that prioritised organisational needs over staff wellbeing. Nurses valued days off; in exchange for more, they often accepted long shifts, representing a compromising strategy:

> *"By doing long days, it means I get more days off, so I find that better for a work–life balance."*

Managers who brought forward shift-finish times to make budget savings were using a collaborative approach to find a 'win-win' solution.

Enjoyment and engagement

Nurses valued meaningful patient interactions and team collaboration. Managers who allocated time away from clinical tasks for administrative work demonstrated an accommodating style that recognised nurses' professional development needs, despite organisational pressures:

> *"It makes them feel appreciated... It's not normal for a band 5 staff nurse to have a management day, and I think, well, they need it though."*

Nurses also valued organisational recognition of their wellbeing, although a divide remained between organisations' initiatives and the realities of shift work. This exemplified an avoiding approach to conflict management, as the fundamental incompatibility remained unaddressed.

Findings

The collaborative and compromising approaches were most effective at preventing potential conflicts from escalating into actual conflicts. Conversely, avoiding or competing approaches often led to actual conflict, such as staff sickness or nurse attrition. The most substantial trend was that a lack of flexibility (a competing approach) led to actual conflict, such as low morale and nurse turnover. Although accommodating approaches could be too simplistic for complex scheduling issues, nurses sometimes compromised their professional values (like team cohesion) to prioritise work–life balance; this reflects a broader societal shift toward valuing work–life balance.

The study also gave a more nuanced understanding of the impact of scheduling choices. While choice generally benefitted wellbeing, external factors sometimes constrained true choice, limiting the effectiveness of workplace solutions. This may explain why some previous studies reported mixed results and highlights the need for a holistic approach to scheduling that considers professional and personal factors.

Implications for practice

For nursing staff, it is beneficial to clearly advocate for personal scheduling needs, but to be open to negotiation and compromise; this could improve wellbeing.

> *"Collaborative and compromising approaches were most effective at preventing conflict escalation"*

Nurse managers should:

- Implement flexible working arrangements;
- Create systematic methods for gathering and responding to feedback on shift patterns;
- Use collaborative approaches to resolve scheduling conflicts, as they lead to more sustainable solutions;
- Pay special attention to intensive schedules, such as working four long days in one week.

Hospital directors should reframe staff scheduling preferences as a best-practice organisational value, not a retention compromise. To reduce nurse fatigue and burnout, modifications – such as earlier finish times for long shifts and adequate rest periods – could be implemented.

Conclusion

Work–life conflict is causing nurse attrition worldwide, partly due to unfavourable work schedules. Researchers interviewed staff about this subject and identified that collaborative and compromising conflict-management approaches were the most effective, allowing both nurses' and organisations' priorities to be met. However, competing approaches often led to conflict and staff turnover. **NT**

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