What ABA C.A.R.E.S. reinforced: growth in ABA is now a workforce challenge

Explore how workforce strategy is shaping the future of ABA, emphasizing recruitment, retention, and support for clinicians to meet growing demand.

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If I had to summarize the biggest takeaway from this year's ABA C.A.R.E.S. Summit in one sentence, it would be this:

The future of ABA is limited by an organization's ability to recruit, retain, and support great people.

Across conversations with providers, owners, clinical leaders, HR professionals, and operations teams, one reality was impossible to ignore. Demand for ABA services continues to grow, yet the availability of qualified clinicians has not kept pace.As a result, workforce strategy has become one of the most important growth strategies in the industry today.

Here are five themes that stood out most to me.

1. The staffing crisis is really a growth crisis

For years, workforce challenges have been discussed as HR problems, but ABA leaders increasingly recognize that staffing challenges directly impact their ability to grow.

Most organizations know there is community demand for services. They know there are families waiting for care. They know they could expand programs, add locations, or increase caseload capacity.

The challenge is finding and retaining the clinicians required to support that growth.

The conversation has shifted from *"How do we fill open positions?"* to *"How do we build a workforce engine capable of supporting long-term growth?*

The organizations that answer that question will be the ones that gain market share over the next several years.

2. Retention starts long before an employee leaves

One of the most common topics discussed throughout the conference was turnover. But many of the strongest leaders weren't treating retention as an exit problem, they were treating it as an employee experience problem.

Retention is influenced by dozens of decisions made long before someone resigns:

- How quickly candidates hear back after applying
- Whether onboarding feels organized
- How schedules are managed
- The amount of administrative burden placed on clinicians
- The quality of communication between leadership and staff
- The overall day-to-day experience of working within the organization

By the time an employee starts looking elsewhere, the real causes of turnover often began months earlier.

The organizations with the strongest retention rates are paying attention to every stage of the employee journey.

3. Technology should remove friction, not create it

During my panel discussion, we explored the unintended consequences of poorly implemented technology. The topic clearly resonated because nearly everyone had experienced it firsthand.

Most ABA leaders aren't looking for more technology. They're looking for fewer headaches.

Technology should make life easier for clinicians, supervisors, recruiters, and administrators. When systems are disconnected, difficult to navigate, or create duplicate work, they can become a source of frustration rather than a solution.

Several attendees shared similar concerns:

- Too many disconnected systems
- Too much manual data entry
- Too much administrative work taking time away from clinical care
- Not enough visibility across the workforce lifecycle

The takeaway was clear: technology matters. But implementation, adoption, and user experience matter just as much.

4. Workforce alignment is becoming a competitive advantage

One thing that impressed me was how many organizations are breaking down traditional silos.

Historically, recruiting, HR, operations, scheduling, and clinical teams often operated independently. Today, leading ABA providers are bringing those functions together.

Why? Because workforce problems rarely belong to a single department.

- If recruiting is struggling, operations feel it.
- If onboarding is inefficient, clinical teams feel it.
- If scheduling creates frustration, retention suffers.

When departments align around shared workforce goals, organizations become more agile, more scalable, and better equipped to support both employees and families.

5. The best ABA organizations are investing in people, not just positions

Perhaps the most encouraging theme from the conference was the focus on people.

Amid conversations about technology, automation, AI, and operational efficiency, providers consistently returned to the same idea: Great care starts with great people.

The most successful organizations are creating environments where clinicians can build meaningful careers. They're investing in:

- Professional development
- Leadership growth
- Stronger onboarding experiences
- Better communication
- Improved workplace culture
- Clear career pathways

When employees feel supported, they stay longer. When they stay longer, organizations become more stable. And when organizations become more stable, families receive more consistent care.

Looking ahead

The ABA industry has tremendous opportunity ahead.

Demand for services continues to grow, awareness continues to increase, and investment continues to flow into the space.

But the providers that succeed won't necessarily be the ones with the biggest budgets or the most locations. They'll be the organizations that build the strongest workforce foundations.

What ABA C.A.R.E.S. reinforced for me is that workforce strategy, operational strategy, and growth strategy are now the same conversation. And the organizations that connect those dots will be the ones best positioned to thrive in the years ahead.

Do these workforce challenges feel familiar? It may be time to consider a more connected workforce.

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