

Leveraging AI to overcome workforce challenges in food and environmental services

Kim Wenger, senior director, contract services



Why it matters:

While most of the conversations about AI in healthcare revolve around clinical implications, it's important to remember that technology also plays an essential role in indirect spend, including environmental services (EVS) and food service.

These are areas where providers often struggle to recruit and retain workforce, especially as many support staff leave for positions in the retail sector. Smart equipment and robotics have the power to save time (and money), particularly when it comes to less human-focused tasks.

But you want to make this integration near-invisible for patients while also scrutinizing the most efficient and effective ways to build it into your EVS and food service strategy, says Kim Wenger, Vizient senior director, contract services.

“You must take a careful, evidence-based approach to evaluating and implementing AI in the healthcare setting to maximize benefits while avoiding potential pitfalls,” she said.

Strategies to consider:

- **Focus on behind-the-scenes necessities.** Look for ways to deploy AI that reduce labor costs and time in EVS and food services that don't require direct human interaction. Examples include using robots for jobs like laundry delivery or food preparation ("robot baristas," for instance, are increasingly popular additions in healthcare and retail spaces). And don't forget that EVS workers play an important role in patient satisfaction — by freeing them from basic delivery services, it gives them more time to talk with patients as they clean hospital rooms and common spaces to ensure consumers are happy with their surroundings.
- **Tap into success stories.** When implementing AI solutions, healthcare providers should rely on peer recommendations and case studies from other hospitals that have successfully piloted and implemented the technology. (Vizient Member Networks, for instance, is one way to connect with other provider institutions to discover best practices.) After all, it's always crucial to validate clinical efficacy and quantifiable benefits.
- **Collaborate with vendors.** Providers should work closely with technology suppliers to understand how to measure and quantify cost savings and productivity improvements from using AI solutions. This is a challenging, but achievable, goal if you invest in building sustainable supplier and GPO partnerships.
- **Evaluate risk versus reward.** The long-term cost savings from AI solutions — like not having to pour money into recruitment and retention initiatives for employees who often leave to work in the retail space — can outweigh the upfront investment and maintenance costs. Make this a factor when evaluating solutions.



To learn more about strategies to help enhance your EVS and food service operations, contact us at food@vizientinc.com

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