Free as a bird

Dr Ahmed Shahrabani relates how Locum’s Nest, the app he co-founded with Dr Nicholas Andreou, is saving the NHS thousands of pounds in staffing costs
What is Locum’s Nest, and how does it work?
Locum’s Nest is a mobile platform that provides doctors with temporary work opportunities within the NHS, helping hospitals avoid the need for expensive locum agencies. It has saved NHS trusts hundreds of thousands of pounds and has a proven track record of ‘supercharging’ hospital staff banks and safely staffing wards. Closely working with its partner trusts, Locum’s Nest has pioneered the way for the NHS’s first truly collaborative digital staff bank.

Doctors can browse, apply and confirm that they would like to fill a vacant shift, from the comfort and ease of a native mobile phone app, and our smart matching algorithm does the rest.

They can strengthen their app profile by uploading a variety of documentation and professional competencies, which are available to view by the employing trust. This creates a digital passport, which is compatible with and synchronises with other trusts’ systems.

Locum’s Nest charges a small admin fee for every shift that is matched and worked; this is following a free use period which we offer to all our partner trusts.

Where did the idea come from?
Nick [Andreou] and I worked together in a general surgery firm at St Helier Hospital, South London. It was here where we were exposed first-hand to the chronic staff shortages that the NHS is facing. We realised the process of finding staff to cover a shift was very cumbersome, expensive and lacked efficiency. Much like many other sectors, such as holiday travel, hospitality and transport, we felt that the expensive agency middleman model of finding staff could and should be disintermediated. While still working as doctors, we spent over 18 months speaking with colleagues, HR, finance and payroll, trying to find out exactly what the best process for each group would be.

What are the advantages to the NHS, compared with using traditional agencies?
Other than the significant financial savings, which amount to hundreds of thousands of pounds each year at each NHS trust, the time saved by the departments trying to fill the shifts is huge. We have moved away from constant scatter-fire communication – with barrages of emails, messages, bleeps and phone calls – to a very simple and efficient two-step process, where a hospital posts a shift and a doctor applies from their mobile phone.

In addition, we have shown that trusts’ fill-rates for shifts have increased dramatically since using Locum’s Nest, improving patient care as there are more doctors on the wards.

Crucially, since we launched, there have been thousands of shifts matched and worked through the platform, and not a single doctor has missed their shift. This is something we are immensely proud of.

Why do doctors like it?
As a native app on both Android and Apple devices, Locum’s Nest allows users to choose exactly how and when they wish to be notified about available shifts. With the in-app digital passport, our users are able to safely store all of their professional documents and keep them updated. This reduces any duplication of work, because when a doctor applies to work at a trust, the organisation is able to view this information with the doctor’s consent, reducing the number of back and forth emails asking for extra paperwork.

How are you working with the NHS to test and roll out the technology?
We launched the pilot of Locum’s Nest at the Royal Surrey County Hospital in October 2016. Since then we have expanded across the NHS and are now in partnership with eight different NHS trusts across NHS England. We have successfully launched what we believe is the NHS’s first truly digital collaborative staff bank for doctors, and with the help of Ashford & St Peter’s Hospitals NHS Trust and the Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Trust, it only took us two months to do so. We now have well over 3,000 doctors on the app, have matched over 7,500 shifts and are on track to saving trusts well over 50% on their agency spend.

Where next for Locum’s Nest?
We have a great team of both doctors and industry experts in the team at Locum’s Nest, and have proven the model works. We’re now rapidly expanding across the NHS and are aiming to form more regional collaborative banks, saving the NHS millions of pounds, improving patient care and, crucially, engaging with a happy and empowered workforce.