

Is there a Doctor in the House? Not Without an Effective Recruitment Strategy

By Allison McCarthy

Positioning your organization for recruitment success is an art that takes a team-building, process-driven approach.

Put away the dartboards, blindfolds and straws. Gone are the days of blind luck and good fortune in lining up physician partners and medical staff colleagues. Today, choosing the right doctor for your organization is every bit an arranged marriage, with more at stake than ever before. Do it well and you further the strategic goals and financial success of your hospital, health maintenance organization or group practice. Do it poorly and you've lost precious time and money, and chipped away at both team morale and organizational image.

Recruitment has become a refined art in recent years as hospitals, practices and physicians themselves grow increasingly savvy about the finer points of marketing positions and securing employment. It's more competitive than ever, too. Many organizations go after the same physicians, and certain specialties are in short supply. Additionally, rural areas are more likely to be underserved than urban locations creating different challenges when recruiting physicians. And finally, both practicing physicians and residents have become more skilled in managing the search process. In short, it's a tough market where candidates have learned to be selective based on how they're treated on the phone, how they're treated in person during site visits, or how smoothly the negotiations go.

Consequently, recruiting has to be managed well whether you are a one- or two-person group or a large medical staff, because you're competing with organizations that have polished their efforts and perfected their processes.

Indeed, an effective recruiting strategy is a process-driven approach that takes planning and preparation, organizational (team-building) commitment, persuasive sales and marketing skills, and good retention practices. You can't afford to drop any balls along the way. The process has to tick along extremely well so that you can demonstrate to the candidate you're courting a good product — your organization — and you can match the right person to your particular situation. The worst things you can do are to just take anyone or recruit in a crisis.

Keys to Success

So how do you successfully launch or effectively turn around a recruiting strategy? Keep these keys to success in mind.

1. *Plan ahead as much as possible.* Meet with physician leadership and key admitters. Pinpoint niche services and determine short- and long-term strategic goals. Incorporate this information into a medical staff development plan detailing how many physicians, and in what specialties, you need to bring on board to accomplish the organization's key priorities. Then write a recruitment plan to outline timelines and budgets for each position you need to fill. Know that it can take up to nine months before a recruit is completed.
2. *Orient your internal team.* Establish an in-house recruitment team of administrators and physicians who will be part of the search process. Hold meetings to review goals, roles and responsibilities. Coordinate training sessions to cover how to conduct effective telephone screening interviews, host informative site visits, and be proactive as mentors once the new doctor arrives. Be certain your team is clear about the terms of the practice arrangement and compensation plan, and that they can knowledgeably and comfortably address community and lifestyle questions. Their role is to not only sell the organization and the opportunity, but to carefully evaluate candidates to be sure they are the right fit for the job. [For more on interviewing and sample questions, see the side piece on the last page.]
3. *Do your homework about market opportunities.* Use the American Board of Medical Specialties, the American Medical Association database, and other resources to learn about numbers and location of physicians in key specialty areas. Gather statistics about your target market nationally and regionally. Educate yourself and the interview team on the competition for each specialty area that has recruitment need. Also, learn what the local market is bearing in terms of compensation levels and benefit packages for the specialty you're recruiting. How can you structure or "sell" your position as the most attractive employment opportunity in the marketplace?
4. *Consider staff or consultants.* Will you need staff, external resources, or a combination of both? If you're expected to find and hire upwards of five physicians over the year, then consider employing staff dedicated and focused to that effort. You may want to use external agencies to help with a politically charged search or a search of unusual complexity.
5. *Finish the forms.* Ensure financial pro formas and contracts are in place. Find or generate marketing promotional materials to describe your geographical area, local hospital and/or group practice, surrounding communities and schools. Write a one-page description of the practice opportunity for distribution to prospective candidates.
6. *Accent the positive.* Play up your area or organization's strengths and minimize the weaknesses. Coach your internal recruitment team on what to emphasize about your specific employment opportunity. Every position has its potential weaknesses, be it organizational politics, the geographical area, the cost of practicing and/or living in that area, too much or too little HMO penetration, or soaring malpractice rates. Recognize the potential challenges in your opportunity and demonstrate to the candidates that your organization will work with them to manage those issues. Teach the interview team how to position the organization in terms that are valuable and desired by the potential candidate and his/her family.

Filling the Funnel

Once your strategy, team and support materials are in place, it's time to fill the funnel. A successful recruitment effort means always keeping the funnel full. Today's medical

organizations can't afford to wait for physicians to beat a path to their door. Take charge when it comes to generating that list of prospects and think big. You have to have a sizeable list on the front end to narrow it down to the 100 or so physicians with whom you'll have an initial conversation. From there, you may do some 50 telephone screening interviews to generate five site visits to select the one perfect candidate who will actually sign on the dotted line.

Before the prospecting begins establish your search criteria by defining education requirements, professional experience needs, and the personality type necessary to fit into your medical community and practice. Determine if you need a special language or ethnic background to meet the needs of your patient population.

Depending upon the opportunity, there are a number of ways to generate a list of prospects:

- Purchase a list of physicians culled from criteria such as medical specialty and current geographical location. The American Board of Medical Specialties, the American Medical Association, and licensure boards can supply these lists. Send direct mail announcing the opportunity and then do some outbound calling as well. If the physician you reach is not interested, ask if he or she knows someone who is.
- Attend recruitment fairs and specialty meetings.
- Advertise in medical and specialty journals and on the web.
- Solicit residents by posting flyers and announcements at area programs.
- Ask your medical staff for recommendations.

Keeping track of all those prospects can be an information nightmare. Consider using a contact management software program to manage the recruitment process and flag key pieces of information on your most promising prospects. Many "off-the-shelf" products are available to help you capture conversation highlights and observations.

An Invitation to Visit

When you've narrowed the field — after completing phone calls and fact checking on credentials and references — it's time to invite your star prospects to visit. Typically site visits are from one to two days and most often it takes two visits before you ink a deal. A typical visit agenda involves:

- breakfast meetings with top administrators, including the chief financial officer to discuss budgets;
- a tour to orient the candidate to the hospital or office location where he or she will work;
- lunch;
- afternoon meetings with potential colleagues;
- a community tour with a local realtor; and
- a dinner meeting with members of your internal recruiting team.

After the site visit, ask your recruiting team to help you evaluate the candidate. Using simple forms you can create yourself, have your team members rate the prospect's communication skills, work ethic, interpersonal skills, maturity, judgment and common sense, long-term interest, education and experience, ability to lead a new group practice, and ability to fit into your particular medical community. Leave space for comments and ask your interviewers to check one box: would hire or would not hire.

Cinching the Deal

Be prepared to go the extra mile with your handful of top candidates. In order to close the deal, you may need to offer relocation assistance, volunteer to help spouses find new employment, or gather information on special needs and school issues for children. Your recruiting team should put the new physician in touch with realtors and banking resources, and set up get-acquainted dinners with medical colleagues and spouses.

Select a person on your recruiting team to watch over the new hire as he or she settles into the new job and community. Have the team member check in regularly with the new physician to see how things are going and how the practice is developing. Make sure the mentor has appointment timeframes tagged in his or her “to-do” list. Schedule weekly, then monthly, and finally quarterly conversations to address and resolve any issues that might arise.

Sound retention practices will safeguard the investment your organization has made to bring the new hire on board. But if the new hire does not work out— despite everyone’s best efforts to defuse any issues along the way — then cut your loses. The best way to do that is to help the physician locate a new employer by introducing him or her to physician recruiters who can make a better match in a new spot.

In Closing

In today’s medical marketplace, successful physician recruiting takes thoughtful planning and careful strategy. Consultants bring added value to the process, but totally outsourcing the recruiting effort may not be your most cost effective (or organizationally sound) option in the long run. It’s best to have a least one diplomatic and knowledgeable person on the inside who really understands the administration and medical community, can persuasively sell the employment opportunity to the right candidate, and who can confidently handle the fine print in contract negotiations. Your prospects and the internal team you assemble will value the recruitment process even more when it’s competently driven from the inside.



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Side Piece:

Building Rapport on the Phone

The telephone is an indispensable part of the recruiting process. The goal of the interview is to verify the candidate's credentials and assess qualifying characteristics to be sure they match the organization's opportunity. Strive to create instant interest with the candidate; that is, shoot for rapport, shared dialogue where both parties talk and listen to one another. The best interviewer knows to keep the organization's as well as the candidate's interests in mind in order to evaluate whether the two will fit.

Building rapport involves the following:

- Eliminate distractions. Turn off your pager and have your office assistant screen your calls.
- Have a planned opening statement when you start the conversation, scripted in advance, so you are prepared when you make the call.
- Ask questions that call for open responses, not merely "yes" or "no" answers. Address both clinical and lifestyle issues.
- Determine what motivates the candidates; if they are entrepreneurial in spirit, they won't fit neatly into a salaried position.
- Create a dialogue. Look for common ground.
- Control the discussion.
- Keep the conversation short; no more than 20 minutes.

During the course of the interview, consider asking the following questions:

- What do you like about your current practice?
- What factors do you think make up a satisfying practice?
- What type of practice arrangement are you looking for?
- Why do you wish to join a practice affiliated with [name of your organization]?
- What do you feel you can contribute to [name of your organization]/
- What do you expect to receive from [name of your organization] in return?
- What are your current and future professional goals?

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