

## The Right Fit

*It takes careful planning to recruit the best physicians.*

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**By Kriss Barlow and Allison McCarthy**

**“We’re trying to grow our neurosurgery service, and our marketing efforts are in full swing. The brochures are done and the campaign is scheduled. But now I learn that one of our key physicians is leaving and another is strongly considering retirement in six months. How can we follow through on our promise to deliver expertise—without the experts?”**

While the specifics and the specialty may change, messages like this are being heard and felt by many organizations. Physician recruitment is becoming a central challenge for healthcare experts, and the issue is affecting strategies and marketing opportunities across the board.

More than one-third of physicians in the United States today are upwards of 50 years old, and many say that retirement in the near future is at the top of their minds. Consequently, healthcare organizations are fixed on combating the repercussions.

When demand is high, physicians have their pick of opportunities. But even with attractive lures and potential perks, many say they’re less willing to “hang in there” and face today’s challenges. Increased paperwork, rising malpractice costs, and more hassle in general are but a few reasons why practitioners say they’re eyeing early retirement, or at least downsizing their practices and hours.

With nearly 90% of hospitals actively recruiting, according to recent surveys, recruiting and retaining quality physicians is a strategic issue at the center of organizational growth. Recruitment has become a longer and more difficult process, given the competition from other organizations to hire away current staff.

**Staffing needs.** In every aspect of healthcare today, competition is intense. Organizations that have been through the cost-cutting process are now looking to develop strategies to grow patient volumes. Increasing patient loads means increasing the staff to care for them. A great deal of attention has been given to the workforce shortage in nursing, technical/radiology staff, and pharmacy. But there’s no doubt that having adequate physicians is becoming an ever-present challenge as well. A recent survey by Merritt, Hawkins & Associates shows that, while more hospitals are looking for family

physicians and general internists, there are also significant challenges in the specialties of orthopedics, general surgery, cardiology, radiology, and anesthesia.

**Physician-level market dynamics.** As an organization frames its business strategy, several agenda items are likely to take center stage. These include the hospital's desire for expanded specialty offerings, growth of subspecialty niche areas of expertise, retirement, increased lifestyle expectations of many physicians, and the wealth of opportunities and dollar offers before them. Planning and marketing professionals need to be keenly aware of the physician's capacity to take on more patients and the strategic implications when the practices are full.

**Medical staff development.** Planning a recruitment strategy requires a clear roadmap. You'll need to make informed decisions about the realities of the marketplace, consumer demand in your area, and legal guidelines worth noting. Together, these factors will help determine the type and number of physicians needed to support the market. A medical staff development plan is a tool that can be used to evaluate market factors and help customize the strategy. It can help analyze basic data such as the ratio of physicians to population by specialty, age, and location. But it also can help uncover physicians' current satisfaction with access and thoughts about their current workloads vs. their desired workloads.

**Rules and regulations.** In addition to Stark legislation (ethics in patient referrals), inurement issues, and federal mandates, recruitment is also affected by state-level regulations. When Corporate Health Group (CHG) assisted in recruiting a cardiac surgeon to a new hospital program in Massachusetts, we knew the commonwealth was still a Certificate/Department of Need-regulated state—a condition that made it extremely attractive to cardiac surgeons in deregulated and extremely competitive markets. This particular physician was eager to consider relocating to another area where he would be more likely to build a thriving practice.

**Location, location.** Recognize that physicians typically make recruitment decisions based on their geographic preferences. And every locale has pros and cons that must be considered when you launch a recruitment search. An organization needs to know and understand what implications these preferences will have on the specific search. For example, in a primary-care search conducted for a hospital in southern New Hampshire, CHG presented data showing the number of practicing internal medicine physicians in the nation, then the number that practiced locally in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. We also showed the number of these physicians in other states that had a possible affinity to the region based on their place of birth, education, or training location. The information not only helped target the prospecting activities, but also helped the organization understand the competition they would face in conducting the search process.

As recruitment begins, you need to match this analysis of the marketplace against the prospective physician's wants and needs. With this framework, the organization will be better prepared to do the following:

- Respond to a candidate's questions
- Know the most effective methods for sourcing candidates
- Set clear expectations about the timeframe that will be needed for the search

- ❑ Effectively manage expectations for recruiters, the practice partners, and those charged with creating a practice development and/or retention strategy

To support the recruitment effort, organizations need to have a clear understanding that this is not just about “what we have.” While a group can have a great practice opportunity, it has to be a match for the individual at a personal and professional level to ensure lasting success.

### **Ingredients for Success**

The formula for finding a good fit requires close examination of your organization, warts and all. The following elements can help you assess your environment, tailor your recruitment process, and better ensure that your hires will be a good match.

**Practice opportunity.** To attract quality candidates, an organization needs to offer an attractive practice environment. This is the time to take a close look at what you offer. Prospects are looking for sound financial practices and positions, existing demand for physicians in that specialty, strong operational support systems, and a balanced call schedule.

**Market-competitive package.** Compensation today includes not only a base salary but an entire package. Review the local and national markets to ensure you’re competitive. Specialty areas such as radiology, cardiology, and some surgical specialties are growing rapidly with demand outpacing supply. Don’t assume the financial package you put together a couple of years ago is still relevant.

There are many resources available that benchmark physician compensation. Do your homework before recruiting an interested candidate. Signing bonuses are becoming quite popular, and paid relocation is a given in today’s market. If you’re competing with other hospitals or groups that offer insurance and retirement benefits, make sure these package elements are competitive as well.

**Good sales and communication skills.** While no one likes to talk about the “s” word, selling is a critical element to the recruitment process. Your recruitment team is selling the benefits of your organization in every meeting, every phone call, and every communication—but without overwhelming your prospects. Take time to put together a team with strong interpersonal skills and an ability to listen carefully as well as ask thoughtful questions. Marketers can help with the right messages and background on the organization and the community offerings. The group also needs to use developed criteria and its instincts to find candidates who would fit with the organization, the community, and the medical staff. Designate individuals who are skilled in doing the “close” at the right time.

**Internal commitment to the process.** Assess what resources are available to support the recruitment process. This is a team effort and everyone, including current physicians and administration, needs to work in tandem to demonstrate their commitment and support of the process. This means being available for conference calls, site visits, social events, tours, and administrative meetings. Marketing and planning provide a great deal of support in many programs and add value to the process. The key is in understanding the role of each team member, how the process works, and how the system can be positioned for the prospective physician.

Once you've completed an internal assessment and have a good understanding of the practice opportunity, approach you'll use, timeline, and accountabilities, it's time to ensure the internal team is prepared to show the practice or organization in its very best light. The team that works on the internal assessment often is involved in the actual recruitment process as well. The group should include practice partners and other physicians the candidate may work with, administrators who will provide the business side, and hospital/group members. Generally, an in-house recruiter leads the group. If your organization doesn't have one, however, marketing may play a more active part in the process.

The group will also need to be actively involved in efforts to retain a candidate that begins practicing in the organization. The group's role doesn't end when the candidate becomes a new hire. Actually, it's just the beginning of making sure the new hire feels comfortable, finds a collegial environment, and has the resources to get the job done.

### **The Prospect's Perspective**

As you work through the process and begin interviewing candidates, step away from your role and look at things through the prospect's eyes. Observe the messages the practice, prospective partners, and the organization is sending to candidates. Even what's not being said can be telling. Remember that candidates select their opportunities, in large part, on first impressions—just as you do with them.

Physicians expect flaws in every organization. But they pay particular attention to how honestly and sincerely the organization communicates with them—and they'll see through those who aren't being candid. Don't be afraid to admit a few shortcomings in your organization. Your prospects will appreciate knowing the truth up front, which may tip the scales in your favor in the long run.

Developing a recruitment process is an eye-opening experience for any organization. You'll find out things about your team that you may have not realized—or haven't wanted to recognize. Every practice opportunity has some rough spots. The key is to recognize them and do your best to manage them effectively.

In highly competitive searches, it's a challenge to keep the funnel full. Our best advice for making sure you can be selective is to continue to make contacts and continue the recruiting process, no matter what your immediate needs

Remember that this is a team effort and it takes everyone's commitment to make it work. It would be great if we could wave a magic wand and have the perfect candidate appear before us. But in the absence of that, do your best to nurture an environment where discipline, diligence, and diplomacy come together to bring the desired results.

## Recruitment Planning

Sourcing, the process of searching for candidates that match your practice opportunity is unique to each recruitment effort. Marketing and the recruitment team should consider these factors when determining how to develop the best approach for finding the right candidates.

- ❑ **Urgency.** If the group needs someone within a short time frame, the best option may be to target local physicians already licensed to practice in that state and possibly adjust your budget accordingly. The other option is to use more resources to expose the opportunity to more candidates in a shorter period of time.
- ❑ **Experience required.** This factor will determine whether you approach only physicians with a certain amount or type of experience or whether you can expand to residents and fellows just completing training.
- ❑ **Geographic appeal.** Know how to use the organization's location to appeal to the physician's lifestyle and professional interests.
- ❑ **Support systems.** Enlist the group's administration and medical staff to make recommendations. If the organization has resident physicians, consider transitioning them into local practitioners.
- ❑ **Financial picture.** Your recruiting budget can vary, depending on several factors. Will you use a search firm, pay for a resource person to source candidates, or use direct mail or print advertising? Remember, if there's less geographic appeal, more experience, or more urgency involved in your search, figure extra dollars into your budget.

Each individual search should have its own recruitment plan. A customized plan will help you organize the process, establish clear timetables, and highlight issues that need to be addressed before you begin the search.



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