

Is the Doctor in? Proven Strategies for Physician Recruitment and Retention

By James Burns

Would you respond to a want-ad that touted a “minimum 60-hour work week” or one that promised “50% on-call burden”? Even worse, would you be intrigued by an offer that described a “variable reporting structure without clear leadership”? Of course not, yet these are some of the requirements and stipulations presented to physicians when recruiting for private practices or hospitals. For obvious reasons, such job descriptions often fail to garner even minimal enthusiasm for the positions they are seeking to fill...Thus, presenting an accurate, though attractive job description to potential candidates can be challenging.

Furthermore, the means of promoting open positions to the right candidates can be equally challenging. Would you post a bulletin at the grocery store, or place an ad on the placemat at a local diner? Of course not, but **some of the technologies that people are relying on to spread their message are just as archaic.**

So, how do you develop an effective program to attract and retain talented physicians to your practice, getting the right message to the right people at the right time?

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution. Corazon believes that **successful physician recruiting is an ever-changing paradigm** that must have resources dedicated to evaluating and continually reevaluating the best way to accomplish goals each and every day. Based on our experience recruiting heart and vascular physicians to programs across the country, there are some *core principles* that will allow you to improve your recruiting ‘machine’ and keep it ‘well-tuned’ in this dynamic market.

The first approach is to treat physician recruitment as you would any other executive recruitment. This sounds simple enough, but few people really put this theory to action.

Here are the key the elements of executive search that should likewise be applied to physician search:

- Explain the salary. When searching for a CEO, President, or other executive-level hire, the recruiter would have a full description of the total compensation package, including fringe benefits and bonuses available to discuss with potential candidates. This seems to never occur with physicians. Furthermore, physicians rarely get an explanation of what their true responsibilities to the organization will be beyond patient care, or even the full scope of the patient care expected. Important details of day-to-day work, such as the availability of physician extenders and/or hospitalists on-site are never discussed. Indeed, these are strong selling points for a position, though are often lost amid other details before an offer can be negotiated.
- Create a job description. A leadership candidate would never be offered a position without having a full understanding of where they will perform most of their duties, who will be monitoring their performance, and what specific hospital functions they need to oversee. **Physician candidates should always understand what is expected from them in terms of patient care within the organization, and how they will be monitored.**

There should be an understanding of workweek hours, where they are assigned full accountability to their service, and how organizational changes will be related to them.

- Support the position statements with data. After telling a candidate they will be on-call five nights per week, be prepared to explain how many times they will actually be required to come to the facility based on historical data. Moreover, if they have to be part of certain committees, they should be told a realistic estimate of the time commitment.

Furthermore, the rationale for adding this position to the organization should be shared. **Data showing volume growth and market demand greatly supports efforts to help physicians determine whether they can fit within the organization and/or grow enough business to support a practice.** In fact, well-planned market and volume data has been able to lure many physicians away from higher monetary offers, simply because of the work completed to show the organization’s commitment to growing their business through the recruitment of physician talent.

- Understand changing lifestyle issues. **Lifestyle issues are the number one factor in determining whether a physician will accept or decline a position.** And, if a beach or sprawling metropolitan area is not nearby, the chance of securing young talent becomes significantly less probable. Savvy organizations have invested large sums of money into determining how physicians and other highly-educated people can acclimate to their region. Many physicians are married, and today more than ever, spouses have significant input into career and re-location decisions. Schools, daycare, and extracurricular activities are other considerations that must be factored into the equation. On this front, leading organizations in less-developed areas have addressed Chambers of Commerce and civic organizations to help lure businesses and money into the region to help with this problem. This is a big concern—big enough that recruiters now put a lot of creative energy into finding win-win solutions for candidates and hiring organizations, and by doing so, have quelled some objections. As a result, physicians can be more easily recruited using the surrounding area as a benefit.

So we have talked about the job, and creating an attractive foundation, but what should change for the recruiter or recruitment process? In a word, everything!

Gone are the days when a candidate would sit and patiently listen and converse with a recruiter regarding a position. We are in the high-tech, 30-frames-per-second age, and a stammering, ill-prepared recruiter is doomed. Recruiters who are change-adverse, with personalities that don’t like rejection may need to change careers, as the future of this industry will be constantly shifting. However, those driven by success, who are inspired, rather than deflated by challenges will best succeed.

Based on Corazon experience, the key elements of the successful physician recruiter in this new age are as follows:

- *Always have key search tools with you:* a PDA, business cards, pen and notebook, and a flyer about your positions. You never know who you will meet, and opportunity only knocks once, and sometimes unexpectedly.
- **Always Be Networking (ABN).** You can never know where potential candidates will be, or who knows who in your personal or professional circle. A chance meetings of strangers has the potential to evolve into a great networking opportunity. It's important to grow your network of professionals, including fellowship leaders and deans, malpractice carriers etc., in order to widen the pool of people who can assist you in your searches.
- *Keep the message simple...* if a physician is talking to you about a position, respect the time and only offer what they ask or what you feel is critical for them to understand. You can tell them more of the in-depth details when the process moves forward.
- *Use technology wisely...* cell phones are a must. Texting is also growing in popularity, especially considering the ability to quickly send a message and respond—which can make this a preferred communication method for busy physicians. E-mail is also a must...but be warned, most e-mail is deleted before it is read if there is nothing personal to make it stick out.
- **Use the internet, but not in the way you think.** Professional job sites are usually not the best place to find high-end candidates. Some people post simply to compare their current job. Others leave their resumes available, though have no intention of switching jobs. Statistics show that most people mentally leave a job about six months before they actually do. The reasons for this are varied: family needs, remarriage, children's college, etc. Savvy recruiters search lifestyle pages as well as other non-job specific areas to search for people to cold call or approach. Be creative to look for program closures, leadership changes, and other such changes that would result in displaced physicians.
- *Understand the rules.* Physicians become very impatient with, and are turned off by, recruiters who do not know state specifics for licensure, immigration laws that may apply to them (e.g., J1, V1, and others), along with Stark and Anti-Kickback issues. With any potential offer, the recruiter should know all the details about these issues, having researched how they could be a factor with the candidate. The few days per year that need to be spent on research to remain 'in the know' about these changes are well worth the credibility that can be gained.

So now that you have successfully recruited expert physicians, how do you keep them? This seems to be the dilemma facing a number of program leaders in recent years. And while there is no easy answer, it's no doubt better to spend limited resources on retaining current physicians than to look for replacement hires.

The biggest key to retention is an open dialogue. Listen to what your physicians say and ask questions in order to best understand their concerns. Having open and honest discussion about what can be changed or addressed and what cannot is important to building a successful and long-term relationship. The job description can again be useful as a guide detailing what behaviors and actions are expected and tolerated, and those that are not

Oftentimes, people chose to leave a job months before they do, which is why ongoing dialogue is so very important. The adage that no news is good news is simply not true. Physicians can have up to 100 contacts per month from other organizations looking to hire them. If they only pay attention to even just 1%, that equates to 12 times per year that someone is telling them a better opportunity awaits elsewhere.

Regular dialoging also helps hospital and/or practice leaders understand the needs of other physicians, and creates the opportunity to intervene in situations that may not have otherwise been brought to the surface for several months.

While money is important, **leadership autonomy and having a voice are almost always cited as key job satisfiers for physicians;** conversely, the lack of these things are most often cited as the main reasons for job dissatisfaction. And then there are quality-of-life considerations as well.

None of these situations are insurmountable, but they require persistent discussion and exchanges of ideas, along with action to keep physicians engaged. Having frequent discussion is only the beginning...using these conversations as a starting point for organizational change is the goal. And lastly, as fewer people take on more responsibilities and time is in short supply, keep in mind that creative communication methods and to-the-point conversations carry great value. The more efficient the communication, the more effective it will be as well.

Too often, we seek to use out-dated methods to recruit in a world that has moved far beyond them. Physician recruitment and retention in today's competitive healthcare landscape requires a dynamic, proactive approach and well-thought-out solutions. We also need to understand that the person that was successful in these tasks 10 years ago may not be able to fill the bill today. While less emphasis is placed on interpersonal relationships and more on rapid turnaround, quick recall of people and situations, and the ability to immediately act on new knowledge, this industry is constantly evolving...don't be left behind!



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