



How NOT to Recruit a Doctor

Adding another physician to your practice is a serious issue, perhaps the most significant strategic decision you will make. Once you have cast the die and decided to bring in another physician, your approach to the task will have a direct impact on the kind of person you ultimately choose -- and how successful the relationship becomes.

There are volumes written on the way to go about recruiting a new doctor. Here, in more concise terms, are some tips on what you should not do, if you seek a top-notch associate on equitable terms.

Don't Wait Until the Last Moment to Begin Your Search

In this case the "last moment" could mean the 10-12 months before the new physician's starting date; that's how early the most attractive candidates are making commitments. Ideally, you should begin the process 18 months before the intended starting date.

Don't Stint on Your Recruiting Efforts

Be willing to invest a few dollars in gaining the widest possible exposure for your practice opportunity -- and willing to invest the time necessary to get to know the final candidates well. The larger your number of potential candidates, the better your chance of finding Dr. Right. And the more time you (efficiently) invest in the recruitment process, the better you will know the strengths and weaknesses of your new associate. If you do not have the time necessary to do the job yourself, consider hiring a professional firm that specializes in physician recruiting for medical practices. Such a firm will have the contacts and a level of expertise that better guarantees your finding Dr. Right -- and with substantially less aggravation for you. The firm's fee will almost certainly be balanced out by the added time you have to see patients.

The cost of choosing a mediocre or downright poor candidate will far outweigh that of the most extensive recruitment and interview process, while the financial and personal benefits of the right choice will repay your investment many-fold.

Don't Delay in Structuring the Deal

Too many practices begin thinking about the details of an employment or buy-in arrangement only after they've decided to make an offer. This can put you at a disadvantage, and lead you into giving up more than you really want or need to. Getting bogged down in protracted, detailed discussions can also eliminate the valuable negotiating momentum achieved by the initial offer. Don't underestimate the importance of this momentum in closing a deal with a highly sought candidate.

Therefore, before you begin interviewing, know what kind of person you're seeking, what kind of offer may be expected, and what you are willing and able to provide. Discuss these issues with your current associates and practice advisors, and have a draft contract ready to present to a candidate.

At the same time however, don't discuss specific financial arrangements with candidates until you are well into the process. Characterize the salary within a broad range -- as broad as \$20-30,000 -- and emphasize that salary is only one piece of the overall financial package. That package could include things such as fringe benefits and incentives, plus the terms and conditions of a buy-in and income division.

Don't Start Off on the Wrong Foot

Remember that the recruitment process is a two-way street, and a potential associate must be interested in you as well. So, make a good first impression. Be sure that your initial letters or conversations with candidates are business-like and convey a positive image of your practice. Make the young physician enthusiastic about joining you instead of someone else.

Many senior physicians scare off younger doctors by complaining about the changing medical environment, government regulation, third-party payors, increased competition, or simply how overworked they are. Your specific gripes, and any broad negative comments -- "Medicine is not what it used to be," for example -- can raise doubts about your practice's long-term viability. Rather than complain about how overworked you are, explain how abundant patients are and how much a new physician is needed.

Don't Try to "Sell" Candidates Until You're Sold on Them

Too often, practices try to "sell" their opportunity without understanding a candidate's special interests or desires. Through their letters or pre-interview telephone conversations, allow candidates to reveal their goals and needs before you reveal much about the practice. This lets you evaluate them and more quickly eliminate those whose goals don't match yours. It also allows you to present your practice in a more appealing way to attractive candidates.

Don't Forget to Check References

Always check references on applicants you are interested in meeting -- before you set up the interview. Assuming you can't talk to references in person, talk to them on the telephone. Never be satisfied with written letters of recommendation, since people will rarely express their reservations in writing and you have no opportunity to ask questions.

There is a wealth of information to be gathered from non-verbal communication. Listen to what is not said, as much as to what is. Note voice inflections, hesitations in answering, or other tell-tale signs that the reference is less than enthusiastic about the candidate. Have a list of prepared questions available to ask each reference. Then build on those questions, as appropriate, to leave no stone unturned and no issue unclear.

Don't Forget About the Spouse

In many cases you'll be dealing with a two-income family, so find out the spouse's employment needs. Even spouses not working outside the home play a major role in choosing the new doctor's practice choice. You should have a separate conversation with the spouse, even before entering serious discussions with the physician.

Don't Dawdle

Once you have chosen your ideal candidate, make an offer right away, preferably in writing. If the candidate has other offers, you want your practice under consideration as soon as possible. And if there are no other offers on the table, the candidate may well accept yours, without waiting for other possibilities and without much negotiation.

Recruiting just the right doctor for your practice is getting more challenging each year. Therefore, do commit yourself whole-heartedly to the endeavor; give yourself plenty of time for planning and preparation; and, when you find Dr. Right, move decisively.

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