

Hiring for Exceptional Results

Chapter FastFACTS

- 1. Identifying skills and characteristics you need before you interview candidates is key to making a good hire.**
- 2. Avoiding common hiring errors, such as feeling pressure to fill an open position, can lead to creative solutions and better hiring decisions.**
- 3. Having no job descriptions can lead to conflict, misunderstandings, confusion, and redundancy in workload.**
- 4. Application forms taken from the Internet or from a standard form may not be in current legal compliance.**
- 5. The best way to learn about a potential employee's performance is to ask detailed questions about specific events from the candidate's past.**

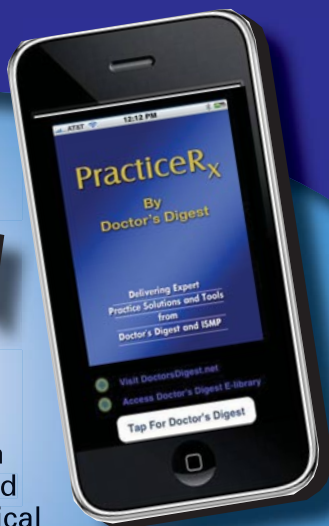
A patient's bad experience with staff can have a profoundly negative impact on your practice. The MGMA recommends that every provider perform as if patient satisfaction were the key to protecting the practice's revenue base and generating new market share. "If you don't have good people greeting your patients and making them feel comfortable with their experience in your office, patients will vote with their feet," Ms. Whaley adds. And, the MGMA points out, satisfied patients usually don't litigate.

Yet many physicians haven't been trained to know how to prevent HR problems by selecting the right candidate when making a hiring decision. Maybe you've realized a few months down the line that the bookkeeper you hired isn't very pleasant to work

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with, or that the new medical assistant (MA) needs more training than you thought.

Another clue that something likely went wrong in the hiring process is having an employee leave within 90 days. “When new employees leave in the first 90 days, it’s often because of poor hiring practices,” Mr. Levoy says. This turnover can be costly. “You waste the time of those people who help new hires get up to speed in their jobs plus the money spent on training. When the new hire doesn’t work out, you have the costs of recruitment, interviewing, reference checking, etc., to replace the person; and in the process, you’re short-staffed. It adds up to considerable stress for everyone—patients included,” he adds.

You may think you’re hiring the right person by going with your instincts during an interview. But making a good hire depends more on your preparation before the interview to identify skills and characteristics needed and to focus on attracting candidates who possess those qualities. No matter what your impression may be during the artificial setting of the interview, it’s hard to predict how that person will perform the job. This chapter will show you how to assess your needs and devise strategies to help you make the right decision.

The Big Picture

Hiring well enhances your ability to practice good medicine and to provide an office setting that appeals to patients, according to Eric Tepper, MD, ABFM, a family medicine practitioner at Golden State Physicians Medical Group in Sacramento, Calif. Having staff who understand their jobs and function at a high level allows you to see patients efficiently, and such staff members provide a good experience for your patients. “Most patients’ view of the office is the phone call they make to get an appointment, what the check-in procedure entails, and what the waiting room looks like,” Dr. Tepper adds.

Assessing Your Hiring Needs

Before plunging into a recruitment effort, analyze what you need to make sure that hiring an additional staff person will actually meet your practice’s current and future needs. Consider these questions:

■ **Will this need be solved by hiring or re-structuring?** Hiring a replacement is not your only option. You may, for example, redistribute a departing employee's responsibilities among existing staff or hire someone with a different skill set to handle these and more responsibilities. Consider whether this particular position should be adjusted.

■ **Is this a short-term or a long-term need?** Factors like expected leaves, available budget, and current business strategy will help you determine if you are going to need people for the short or long term. That conclusion will affect whether you focus your search on temporary or permanent staff and whether you turn to outsourcing rather than hiring.

■ **How will you determine best staffing?** The following considerations may help you decide precisely what your staffing needs will be:

- Current and historical staffing levels
- Average work hours of current employees
- Skills of current employees
- Turnover rates
- Ratios you wish to maintain (i.e., the number of MAs vs. the number of doctors)
- Number of invoices your practice generates divided by the number of full-time physicians (Once you notice these numbers spiraling upwards, it may be time to add to staff.)
- How long it takes for a patient to get an appointment in the busier time slots (If busy hours are often full, it may be time to add another doctor or support staff.)
- Demographics of the area in which you practice (If the population in your locale is growing, for example, your practice may need to expand as well.)

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What Kind of Candidate Do You Need?

Here are some common errors made during recruitment:

The “Pressure to Fill Position” Error. Do you need to fill the position quickly, or are you determined to find the right candidate, no matter how long it takes? Another way to ask this is, are you filling a vacancy or hiring for a career? If you’re in a rush to fill a position, you may overlook red flags. “As much as you need to fill the position, it is critical to take the time to be thorough,” says Cynthia J. Davies, PhD, SPHR, principal at Human Capital Management Strategies, LLC, in Downingtown, Pa. She also urges awareness of the “halo effect.” That’s when the perception of positive qualities in one part gives rise to the perception of similar qualities in the whole. For example, says Dr. Davies, “An interviewer might judge an applicant’s entire potential for job performance on the basis of a single characteristic such as how well the applicant dresses or speaks.”

To avoid this kind of pressure, consider filling the vacant position with an interim resource—perhaps by bringing back the last person who held this position on a contract basis or hiring an experienced temp, outsourcing some aspect of the job, or arranging for a family member to fill in temporarily. Then you have the luxury of following up on all questions about a candidate during the selection process, including a reference check.

The “Too Much Attention to Skills” or “Too Much Attention to Cultural Fit” Errors. “The truth is you can’t ignore [skill or fit] at the expense of the other,” Mr. Ostrom says. Very competent individuals don’t thrive in the practice when there’s no cultural fit; individuals with great cultural fit and rapport are not always the most skilled at providing the care needed, he says. Both extremes may be sources of tension and frustration.

The “Blinders On” Error. When an employer imagines that only a person with a specific skill set can do a certain job, he or she may ignore someone with an alternative background who might be quite successful in the role. For example, a candidate with prior medical office background may be preferable, but is such experience mandatory? “That experience can be overrated,” Dr. Glassheim says. “I’ve seen experienced people [fail] and people in their first position out of school do wonderfully. I put more onus on core character—how self-motivated they’ve been

in life to date, and how motivated they are during the hiring process to do some research on me and my practice.”

The bottom line? Make sure that during your selection process you are open to thinking creatively or considering someone who doesn't fit a particular profile in your mind, while remaining aware of what it will take to bring this person up to speed. “A hiring risk may turn out to be a great investment,” says Richard A. Berning, MD, a pediatric cardiologist in Hartford, Conn. He took a risk when



“There are no right or wrong answers to behavioral questions, only responses that may or may not be relevant to the job for which you're hiring.”

Bob Levoy

Management Consultant

Author *222 Secrets of Hiring, Managing, and Retaining Great Employees in Healthcare Practices*

he hired an office manager with no prior medical office experience because she was “smart and organized and had a ‘teach me everything’ mentality,” he says. Five years later she is still with the practice, working part-time in order to go to nursing school.

The “Similar to Me” Error. When you like a candidate because he or she is like you, you may be forgetting that you need someone with skills to complement your own, not accentuate them. “When physicians in small practices hire people who are like themselves, they don't get a diverse team—a team with unique perspectives, differences in life experience, differences in settings they've worked in, and different educational levels. When you have this, the team complements each other and rounds out the practice,” Mr. Ostrom says.

To avoid this error when considering staffing needs, assess the existing practice culture, its staff's skills, and its level of diversity. Also consider your practice's commitment to demographic diversity: Should your staff demographic reflect that of your customer base? Does it?

Creating Job Descriptions

Now it's time to create a job posting to inform those seeking jobs of what you are looking for. Base this posting on written job descriptions that you may have on file. Written job descriptions are not only useful as a foundation for your outreach to the best-



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Marcia Layton Turner
Layton & Company
Penfield, N.Y.

qualified candidates, but are also critical tools for conducting evaluations, managing job performance, and making promotion decisions. “Without job descriptions, there are way too many inefficiencies; roles and responsibilities are unclear, which is one of the major reasons for conflict, misunderstandings, confusion, redundancy in workload, and things falling through the cracks,” Dr. Johnson says. Finally, a lack of job descriptions would undermine your ability to defend your practice against complaints regarding pay, job performance, status, or discrimination.

If you already have job descriptions, make sure they're current. If possible, share the job description with the outgoing employee or those who work closely with him or her to make sure it accurately reflects the job. If you don't have job descriptions, you can either hire an HR consultant, look up samples online (try Websites like the Occupational Information Network at <http://online.onetcenter.org> or www.shrm.org), purchase an online software program that produces legally defensible descriptions, or assign staff members the task of creating them.

Once you've compiled this information, you can pull from it to write a realistic job posting based on what people actually do, not an ideal that's impossible to master. Don't be tempted to dress up the job posting if you're having trouble getting good candidates, warns healthcare consultant Judy Capko. “Nothing

is worse than someone being hired and disappointed by the end of the first week because the job isn't what it seemed. You sabotage your chances for a good working relationship and getting top performance if the new hire thinks he or she has been tricked," she says.

Recruitment Strategies

Now it's time to get the word out about the position you need to fill. Your strategy will depend on three factors:

1. How many candidates do you want to consider? In a depressed economy, an ad on a jobseekers' Website like Craig's List can produce hundreds of resumes in a matter of days. You may not have time to weed through all the candidates. If you have time to consider only a few candidates, it may be worthwhile to use staff or external resources to triage the applications.

2. Do you hope to gain public relations benefits from your recruitment activity? Placing a recruitment ad reflects on your practice, as does anything with your name on it. "Placing a recruitment ad indicates that your practice is growing, which is attractive to patients and physicians. But how you word your ad, how you describe the practice, and what kinds of people you are looking to staff it will also communicate what kind of place to work it is," says marketing consultant Marcia Layton Turner of Layton & Company in Penfield, N.Y. "Keep in mind that your ad is likely to be read by people outside your target audience and can impact the kinds of patients you attract."

3. What is your budget for this recruitment? The good news is that with the advent of social networking and Internet job posting, the costs for posting a position have all but disappeared. The list of recruitment methods in the next section contains only a few that will make a dent in your budget.

Recruitment Methods

You may be missing the right candidate if you're not considering all possible recruitment opportunities. You're probably familiar with job advertisements in popular media, in specialized medical publications, on association Websites or their newsletters, or on Internet sites like *monster.com*. Consider these additional options:

Using a temp can solve many short-term staffing problems and can result in the hiring of someone already familiar with your practice. Some temporary agencies charge a fee for con-



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Ron Chapman, Jr.

Shareholder

Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, P.C.

Dallas, TX

verting their temp to a full-time employee. Use caution when working with temps. “You absolutely can get into trouble if you keep a temporary employee around too long. Six months is a general guideline where I start to worry,” says Ron Chapman, Jr., shareholder in the Dallas office of Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, P.C., a national labor and employment law firm. “If you ‘exercise control’ over the temp, a court could rule that he is an employee and not a contractor, and you’ll be subject to financial penalties for the misclassification,” he says. That control can include things like giving performance feedback to or disciplining the employee.

Many of the best hires come from referrals. Start with your staff since they are most familiar with what it takes to succeed in your environment and what skills your practice is lacking. The Murray Women’s Clinic in Murray, Ky., rewards employees for referring a job applicant who is hired. “I’d much rather give staff members the money than spend a few hundred dollars on advertising,” says Gary Houck, the clinic’s practice administrator. “We get better employees because our staff knows them and has a vested interest in finding someone who will carry their weight and not prove to be an embarrassment to the [referring] employee.”

Using employment agencies or headhunters is an expensive option, but one that makes sense when you require specialized or competitive skills and have no time or staff resources to handle the recruitment.

When your practice hosts a community event, when a physician from your practice speaks at a school or conference, and when you publish an article in the local paper on a health-related topic, you are attracting potential patients as well as potential staff. If you're hiring, bring job descriptions along to these public venues, or mention your needs during your presentation.

Clues to Good Hiring

There are almost as many ways to screen your applicants for the skills and qualities you are seeking as there are to attract them in the first place.

The cover letter and resume are the standard ways that applicants introduce themselves to your practice, but you don't have to use them if your application form is all you want or if your applicant comes from a trusted source. If you do accept resumes, look for a cover letter that the candidate has customized for your practice and for the position. The resume can help you screen for requisite skills, but don't assume that if you don't see what you're looking for on the resume, the candidate lacks it. On the other hand, don't assume that everything on the resume is true. It can be verified during an interview, reference check, or by using some other selection method. The candidate's goal is to impress you; if the cover letter and resume represent his or her best work, it should be error free.

Use application forms only when the candidate doesn't have a resume, when you want the data formatted in a particular way, or when you want information beyond what would be included in a typical cover letter or resume. Make sure that any application form you use is compliant with current law; for example, you may not ask for the candidate's age or maiden name.

Requesting and evaluating work samples—such as asking the candidate to take a patient's blood pressure or history—can be

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complicated, expensive, and time consuming. But they can give you a good idea of how the candidate will perform. The Website *HR-Guide.com* says it's difficult for applicants to fake job proficiency, which helps to increase the relationship between their score on the test and job performance. Additionally, because the candidate is being tested on equipment that is the same equipment actually used on the job, the sample gives a realistic preview to both employer and employee.



“It is difficult to be conversational [during an interview] without violating the law. Switch your questions to those that focus on experience, training, educational background, and to some extent work values.”

Denise Smith Cline
Partner
Smith Moore Leatherwood
Raleigh, N.C.

Although many former employers are no longer authorized to provide you anything other than confirmation of dates of employment and job title, reference checks are still a useful way to discover falsified credentials. Even if you do get references to talk to you more openly about the candidate, one reference may give a glowing review to a candidate whom another rater might describe as merely average. Assuming you can induce reviewers to respond to just one qualitative question, an example that professional recruiters have found to be extremely revealing is, “If you were staffing a medical office from scratch, is this an employee you’d want on board, and why?” At the same time, consider background checks (see “When and How to Use Background Checks,” p. 44).

The use of social networking sites like Facebook raises new ethical questions for employers who now have access to more information about their employees—or potential employees—than ever. It’s possible that uncovering information online might be used to make a discriminatory hiring decision. If, for exam-

ple, the candidate's social networking site reveals his sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or the fact that he has six children, and you use that information as a reason not to hire him, you can be opening yourself up to a discrimination lawsuit. Is it worth the risk? Because more information leads to a good hiring decision, it's worth the risk, Mr. Chapman argues. "As long as it's clear in your mind that you cannot take into account any characteristic protected by law in your hiring decision, I'd say get all the information on your preferred applicants you can lawfully get," he says.

Interviews That Work

Though widely used as the primary basis for a hiring decision, interviews are only moderately reliable because one rater's reaction to an applicant can be inconsistent with another's. Raters are usually not trained in how to create and ask effective interview questions. On the other hand, interviews are cost effective and more feasible than work samples or some other selection methods. Many HR professionals feel that interviews are useful as measures of motivation, communication, and fit rather than job performance.

The most commonly asked questions in an interview focus on a candidate's prior experience, like "What were your duties in your last job?" or "Have you worked on bill collections?" These are useful, but they are not predictors of future performance as they don't show you how the candidate did the job, but only that he or she did it. The questions that give you the best idea of a potential employee's performance are called behavioral questions and seek detailed accounts of specific events from the candidate's past. Research over the years has repeatedly shown that these answers are reliable indicators of future performance. Use behaviorally based questions, such as "Tell me about a time when you had to make a tough decision" or "How have you saved your practice money?" Mr. Levoy advises. "There are no right or wrong answers to behavioral questions, only responses that may or may not be relevant to the job for which you're hiring," he says. (See "The Five Most Effective Interview Questions," p. 46.)

There are also questions that you cannot ask during an inter-

When and How to Use Background Checks

If the position you're trying to fill would require the applicant to work with confidential financial and credit information about patients, to be alone with children in an examining room, or to work around prescription drugs, consider running a comprehensive background check. "In most situations, there is no law that specifically says you have to do background checks, but it's a good idea," Mr. Chapman says. "You avoid hiring the wrong person. And you avoid being second-guessed down the road. Should something bad happen, the victim may turn around and sue you for negligence because you should have checked the employee's background." To do a more extensive background check, you must get signed permission from the applicant on a document that is not part of an application or any other employee paperwork, including the application, to comply with the Fair Credit Reporting Act.

Because background checks can take weeks or even months to complete (depending on the state in which you are practicing), you may need to make a job offer that is contingent on a background check's coming through "clean," i.e., free of any conviction records. If you get a negative report, Mr. Chapman says, you must inform the candidate and give him an opportunity to respond before taking adverse action. "You can't just refuse to hire someone based on information in the background report, without giving him a chance to respond to what you've learned. Instead, tell him you intend not to hire him based on the report and ask for his explanation. Specific written notices are required under the law," he explains. Be aware that there is no one database used for background checks. "Make sure you know what you are getting. Some are more thorough in checking databases all over the country; some go back five, seven, or ten years," Mr. Chapman says.

view because you may incur legal trouble. These are questions whose answers would make it possible for you to discriminate against a candidate because he is a member of a protected class, explains Denise Smith Cline, partner at Smith Moore Leatherwood, Raleigh, N.C. "'Protected class' is a legal term to identify certain characteristics that are protected by law from discrimination. It's illegal to make the fact that a candidate is a particular race, age, gender, etc., part of your reason for hiring or not hiring someone." Overall, Ms. Cline suggests the focus of a job interview be on skills, the schedule of the job, and the person's

ability to perform those functions—without getting into their personal lives. “It is difficult to be conversational without violating the law. Switch your questions to those that focus on experience, training, educational background, and to some extent work values,” she advises.

Whatever selection method you choose, involve your current staff. If there are many candidates, your staff can talk to all of the candidates and recommend their top three choices to you. If that’s not possible, Mr. Levoy suggests having them meet with the top three candidates or even take them to lunch. “This is important because the new person—if he or she has been approved by the staff—will learn faster, fit better, and stay longer than a person the staff doesn’t like,” he explains.

Preparing an Offer Letter

Ready to make an offer? During the course of your hiring process, you have no doubt discussed salary, vacation, and other details about the position. Collect all the details of the candidate’s proposed employment and create an offer letter. This is an important part of an employee’s personnel file as it can be useful in a lawsuit to delineate the promises you’ve made

The offer letter needs to establish an “at will” status. This is a relationship in which employer and employee are not obliged to continue their working relationship beyond the point when it is not working out for either party. Explains Ms. Cline, “With some exceptions, somewhat dependent on your state, you can terminate an employee for any reason—or no reason—unless it is an illegal reason.” (See Chapter 5 for more on this topic.) Your offer letter needs to state explicitly that this is an “at will” relationship, and it needs to avoid any language that implies that employment is ongoing or long term, that is, promises of future compensation or additional vacation time in the future (i.e., other than what is currently being offered). If the employer made statements during the interview process, either orally or in the offer letter, that imply an employment agreement, then the employee may consider that language enforceable as a contract, Ms. Cline cautions.

SHRM suggests that an offer letter contain the following:

- **Basic information:** Include the title of the position, start date,

The Five Most Effective Interview Questions

What questions should you ask potential employees to find out if they will be a good fit for your office? Bob Levoy, management consultant, speaker, and author of **222 Secrets of Hiring, Managing, And Retaining Great Employees in Healthcare Practices**, has asked many clinic administrators, practice managers, office managers, and doctors what interview questions they've found most effective and revealing. Here are their top five:

1. **Why did you leave your previous job? And the one before that?**
2. **What are you looking for in your next job that's missing from the present one?**
3. **What aspects of your last job did you like best?**
4. **What aspects of your last job did you like least?**
5. **In your last job, in which of your accomplishments did you take the most pride?**

"What makes these questions effective is that the candidates don't know what answer you're looking for," Mr. Levoy says. "They don't know what kind of boss you are and can't tailor their response to mention qualities that you possess."

full- or part-time status, and applicable shift.

- **Job-specific information:** Specify whom the employee will report to; what his or her hourly, weekly, or monthly salary will be; and the projected performance development/evaluation periods.
- **Benefits information:** Specify any applicable benefits, including eligibility for health care insurance, 401(k) plan, life insurance, etc. You might also include paid leave information; the amount of leave the employee is entitled to (including holidays; paid time off; and vacation, sick, or personal time).
- **Terms of employment:** Spell out any prerequisites for this position to be granted, such as successful completion of drug testing or background checks, signing of confidentiality agreements, and completion of an I-9 (eligibility to work in the U.S.) form.
- **"At-will" employment status:** A statement that the employment relationship is "at will." Mr. Jacuzzi suggests verbiage in

this section stating that the “at will” status cannot be changed without signed documentation from the head of the practice.

A signed copy of the offer letter should be included in the new employee’s personnel file. As with any document that you present to your employees, it’s imperative to have legal counsel review your offer letter template. This will ensure that your offer letter is not a contract.