

Five Healthcare Hiring Insights That I Wish I Knew Twenty-Five Years Ago

By Ralph DiPisa, Partner, Phillips DiPisa

I've been involved in healthcare and healthcare hiring my entire adult life. From my student days as an undergraduate at Providence College and a graduate student at George Washington University; through several management positions at hospitals across New England; and in nearly a decade here at Phillips DiPisa, I've learned a lot.

Not everything, certainly, but enough to be able to say without a doubt that, "I wish I knew then what I know now."

And while I'm not sure I've made enough mistakes to write a book (yet), I've certainly made enough to write a brief white paper. And so with no further delay, I give you,

"Five Healthcare Hiring Insights That I Wish I Knew Twenty-Five Years Ago."

Don't Ignore Personal Fit

One of my first hospital C-Suite jobs was working as COO in the office of the President. Literally. The Hospital President, a former army colonel whom I later

learned was famous for his micro-management, put my desk *in his office with him*. He thought it would help us work as a team.

Wait, it gets worse. Every day, he left sticky notes all over my chair with "to do's" for me to complete. He second-guessed even the most trivial of my decisions, often reversing them. When I asked what I should use for a phone, he picked his up off his desk, handed it to me, and said, "Use this anytime you want."

It was a disaster – I resigned after three weeks and two days (including one sick day). In retrospect, however, I should have seen it coming. I had the skills he needed, and he had the opportunity I wanted, and at first blush the position looked perfect. Unfortunately, at 31 years old, and eager to make a big career move, I overlooked what my gut was telling me: this was a person whose management style just wasn't compatible with mine.

Working now as a recruiter, and in no small part due to my disastrous and memorable experience all those years ago, I pay close attention to personal style, cultural fit, and other "soft" factors when placing candidates.

A new hire can have all the qualifications in the world, but if he/she doesn't fit on a personal level with the organization and coworkers, everyone will waste a lot of effort swimming upstream.



Ralph DiPisa

An honest assessment of personal fit is particularly important when the position in question (like the one in my experience) has objective elements that on paper are very attractive to the candidate: A significant salary increase and attractive perks; a chance to relocate “back home” to a certain city; an opportunity to take a big career step. It’s under these compelling circumstances, in particular, that human beings tend to ignore what their gut tells them and, instead, reach for the big score.

Hire the Best Athlete

Imagine if a prominent physician group affiliated with your organization decided to sign on with another hospital. Or, what if a major for-profit provider announced that it was opening up a surgery center just down the street from you? Both of these things happened to me as a hospital executive, and both are examples of how quickly things can change – beyond your control and in a way that significantly alters the playing field.

At times like these, versatility among your staff members – as opposed to pure technical skills – is what allows you to make the changes necessary to manage in a tight spot. When Yankee superstar Alex Rodriguez, for example (whose 10-year, \$252 million contract is the largest in sports history), agreed to accommodate Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter and switch

to third base upon arriving in New York, he proved both his athleticism and versatility beyond a doubt. Although based on recent news reports, his skills at managing his personal life may leave something to be desired, it’s clear that had he been “only a shortstop,” A-Rod would have provided much less value to the team.



When he joined the New York Yankees, Alex Rodriguez proved his versatility by switching from shortstop to third base. Look for that sort of versatility when hiring healthcare executives as well.

Early in my career, I focused my hiring efforts on bringing in the specialist – the perfect, superstar candidate for the open position. What I’ve realized since, having seen how quickly the competitive, regulatory, and organizational landscape can change in healthcare, is that finding the best all around “athlete” available is usually more important. Skills can be taught and experiences acquired.

Adaptability, competitiveness, and sound logical thinking, on the other hand, are not so easily learned. In our shifting world, these tend to be what carry the day.

Hire the Entire Family

While working as a Vice President of a hospital in Massachusetts, we closed a big deal with a prominent surgeon from out of town to join our organization. We met several times, shook hands on the deal, and I began preparing for his arrival. One week before he was scheduled to start, he called us to say he wasn’t coming. His wife refused to move.

Here as well, hindsight is 20-20. I realized afterwards that the doc had hardly involved his wife in the process, and despite planning to move far from home to an entirely different environment, they had considered few of the lifestyle factors along the way. Another red flag, and I missed it entirely.

In general, the bigger the job, the longer the hours, the more travel involved. And the more disruptive the move, the more important the candidate’s support structure at home becomes. If there’s poor communication or disagreement within the family at the beginning, it’s likely to only get worse, as the excitement of the move fades and the family is left with the day-to-day realities of life in the new location.

Particularly if the position is situated in a challenging environment (remote location, oppressive weather, etc.), you’ve got to step up (early and often) and ask point blank, “What’s the attraction for you here? Why are you and your family interested in moving here? What are your hesitations?”

Site visits by the entire family are critical as well. Have them drive around, introduce them to a trusted real estate agent, set up an appointment with the local school principal, etc. Everyone in the family – not just the candidate himself – needs to be onboard in order to make a successful placement.

Learn to be a Buyer and a Seller

Selling comes naturally to me, so one of the things I try to be aware of when filling a position is not overselling. Certainly, I want to paint a positive picture; and with hard-to-fill positions in particular, when you've got someone who appears both qualified and interested, it's a challenge to not start reeling them in right away. Under these circumstances, however, a little hesitation goes a long way. If you're selling the entire time, you're not paying close enough attention to what the candidate is saying, so that you can accurately gauge his/her level of interest. I try to step back and make sure the candidate demonstrates genuine enthusiasm for the position.

On the flip side, I find that many hiring managers often err too far in the other direction: they walk into the situation under the assumption that it's the candidate's job to sell them on why they are right for the position. That's fine, but I try to make our clients aware that, at some point, you need to make the candidate feel that you really want him/her.

Hiring, as with any new relationship, works best when it's a two-way street. In a search for a key executive, you may be buyer or seller at different phases. Market dynamics and the basics of supply and demand may have an impact on which side needs to work a little harder overall, but if all the selling effort stems from one side and all the buying from the other, neither party is likely to be happy with the final outcome.

A Little Mentoring Goes a Long Way

One thing that completely escaped me in my early days as a hiring manager was the importance – to both a candidate's happiness and an organization's development – of a strong mentoring culture.

People quickly learn how much interest a given organization or supervisor takes in the personal development of staff. This can take the form of assuring that employees stay active in professional organizations; funding additional education; exposing staff to projects and people out-

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side their direct areas of responsibility; or simply demonstrating a commitment to promoting from within. Whatever the specifics, it sends an important message that, “If you work here and do well, you'll go places.”

Some managers and/or organizations are afraid that if they develop their people, they're more likely to leave. That may be true, since more qualified people have more options. The trade-off, however, is that you'll find it much easier to attract high-quality executives if you have a reputation for developing them and helping them succeed. I'd rather have a star on staff for just five years, than have never attracted that person in the first place because my organization is viewed as a dead end.

The bottom line is that mentoring improves the people you have and, thanks to the reputation you'll develop, makes it easier to backfill their positions with other high achievers when your home-grown stars move on to bigger and better things.

After twenty-five years in healthcare management and hiring, I sometimes feel as if I've seen every situation and made every mistake possible. If only that were true.

In the wild and wacky world we live in, there's always something new to learn and with that, a new opportunity to stumble. Put these five lessons to work for yourself, however, and you'll be that much more ahead of the game.

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