It’s been said that, “Healing is an art, medicine is a profession, and healthcare is a business.”

We couldn’t agree more. In 2015, however, we offer this refinement:

“Healing and medical discovery are art; clinical medicine and scientific research are professions, healthcare and biopharmaceuticals are businesses.”

Indeed, as formerly disparate healthcare industries, professions, and organizations continue to evolve and aggregate, both professionals and the institutions they represent must navigate massive change on a near daily basis.

Hospital leadership is no exception; as recently as a decade ago, the physician-led hospital was an anomaly. Today, as healthcare organizations have come to recognize the benefits of doctors leading other doctors, the majority of hospitals ranked in the U.S. News & World Report Honor Roll have physicians at the helm.

Recruiting physician/scientist leadership, however, presents special challenges. Physicians and scientists are inherently different from their “business” counterparts in healthcare and industry. They see the world through varied lenses. They view their careers differently. They are often motivated by dissimilar core objectives. The process of identifying, recruiting, and hiring these professionals, therefore, must also take a specialized approach.

In this article, we consider these important differences and offer practical suggestions for hiring exceptional physician/scientist leaders.

Connecting with Physician/Scientist Leaders

Business people are relatively easy to connect with, particularly if you make it clear that the objective of your outreach is to speak with them about a promising career opportunity.

Physicians and scientists, on the other hand, tend not to answer their own phones (or return calls, generally). They are immersed in their laboratory reviewing the genome of a mouse perhaps, or they are in an examining room caring for a patient. The best of them (i.e., the ones you want to recruit) lecture regularly, travel frequently, and attend conferences whenever possible. In other words, they are in demand, and their calendars are jam-packed … reaching them requires a different approach.

“Physicians and scientists are inherently different than their ‘business’ counterparts in healthcare and industry.”

Ira J. Isaacson, MD

Anne Neubauer
That process might begin with a simple email: Something with a compelling subject line (e.g., “Chair Neurosurgery, XYZ Hospital”) and a paragraph describing the position. If you then present the role in a compelling way – consistent with that individual’s research and personal mission – they are often willing to engage.

One should understand that the academic research and scientist community is highly network- and mentor-oriented. Who you are and who you know carries much weight, and success is not judged solely on one’s own accomplishments. It’s also based on whom else you’ve helped along your way as you endeavor to continue your legacy.

And so, effective recruiting in this top echelon often depends on identifying established professionals working in the target domain and soliciting their suggestions of appropriate candidates. Even if a particular physician/scientist has no interest in making a move, he/she likely knows others who are, and they are usually happy to assist.

Last month, for example, we reached out to Dr. Jones (not his real name), the head of a national cancer institute, for suggestions on who might be the best person in the field of immuno-oncology. We let him know who we were and who we represented. He responded thoughtfully and shared the names of two excellent candidates. Often candidates are more likely to speak to us because of the nomination by a respected peer or friend.

Physicians/Scientists Have Discrete Objectives

Physicians/Scientists are highly focused on whatever it is they’re currently committed to doing. Unlike a typical businessperson, physicians and scientists don’t tend to think strategically (if at all) about the next step in their careers. Career development is generally low on their list of priorities because they are busy assisting others. For them to lift their heads and consider a new opportunity, the role needs to be something that resonates with their greater mission. This is particularly true if the opportunity involves a move outside their perceived traditional career path.

Dr. Smith (not her real name) was a tenured, senior-level scientist running a well-respected lab at one of the top 10 medical schools in the country. She was considered one of the finest minds in her area of specialty and was recognized as an academic up-and-comer. She had $3M in extramural funding, 12 post docs and doctoral trainees on her research team, and a 3,000 square foot lab. To the extent she thought about it at all, Dr. Smith believed her next career move would be more of the same, though on a larger scale.

Consequently, when we contacted her on behalf of a global biopharma enterprise, with an opportunity to oversee a $2B budget, 2,000 people, and all research for the organization, it was clearly not what she had ever envisioned. Moreover, she would have to give up her tenure in the academic world and take a leap
into the corporate unknown. Ultimately, the opportunity for her scientific and clinical mission to have a much greater, long-term impact was what compelled her to accept this new role.

The good news in recruiting physicians/scientists is that the successful candidates tend to be very open-minded to new information as they consider changing roles. The recruitment challenge, then, is in helping them evaluate their career opportunities within a larger perspective.

Physicians/Scientists Are Risk Averse

“As first do no harm.”

As physicians, this is how we are trained and, to some degree, how we are selected. We generally possess a cautious and highly analytical personality, taught from the very beginning that we must help people and mitigate risk in the process. That’s just part of the fundamentals of the art of medicine.

Scientists share a similar orientation, if for different reasons. They live in a world of proof and validation – following a breakthrough, the scientific community first negates it, then analyzes it, and finally tries to duplicate it. It’s a world of small steps, one built on top of the one before.

All of this carries over into how physicians/scientists view their careers. Unlike successful businesspeople, who tend to move quickly for the next best opportunity, physicians/scientists are less interested in career advancement for its own sake. Instead, they pay close attention to the possible consequences – intended or otherwise – of a significant change.

Family Matters: If we have a promising candidate who is initially interested in a particular opportunity, we often try to call him or her at home on the weekend, hoping the spouse (where applicable) answers the telephone. Should that happen, we often hear a range of responses from, “I’ve heard your name; you’re the person trying to ruin my life,” to, “Don’t worry, John will be taking the job.”

Whatever the specifics, understanding the family dynamic early in the process is critical; it will absolutely impact whether or not a candidate ultimately accepts an offer. If the candidate is happy and successful at a bucolic rural university medical center, and has a beautiful house on a lake, with two teenagers in high school, the likelihood of a move to New York City diminishes.

Bottom line: physicians/scientists are very practical regarding family and lifestyle and tend to be less motivated by money, status, and power. When it comes to accepting a
new opportunity, these candidates insist on more detailed information and more time for reflection than other professionals.

**Physicians/Scientists No Longer Fear “The Dark Side”**

As recently as 15 years ago, the academic physician/scientist community saw a move to the biopharmaceutical or medical device industry as selling out, proverbially, “going to the dark side.” And, once you did, you never came back.

Over the last decade, however, this attitude has changed dramatically. As NIH funding was sharply curtailed, physicians and scientists found it harder to secure grant renewals and tenure. In turn, they began to appreciate the career opportunities industry offers. With billion-dollar R&D budgets, physicians/scientists realized that with significant industry resources, they could further their respective mission that much faster.

Today, academia and industry share a more common, often collaborative, vision, and the negative tinge previously associated with moving to industry is gone. Now, a physician/scientist might begin his/her professional life as an academic practitioner, make the move into the biopharma sector mid-career, and then return to academia for a post-industry leadership career. Retirement for physician/scientist leaders often occurs much later than for other professionals. “70” is truly the “new 50” for physician/scientist leaders.

In fact, the physicians/scientists with this kind of varied experience are now in high demand. Formal business training (an MBA, typically) is also now quite common, and the ability to blend the clinical benefits of higher quality, scientifically rigorous healthcare with the associated financial return is more important than ever.

Add to this that medicine and the new “big science” has become a team sport (when I went to medical school, teamwork was affectionately known as “cheating”) and collaboration across teams, departments, organizations, and industries is paramount. Experience in both academia and industry has become an important prerequisite for success at the highest levels of healthcare leadership.

**Conclusion**

Healthcare continues to evolve rapidly; enlightened organizations understand that today’s physicians/scientists must become tomorrow’s successful leaders.

Any effort targeting the best physician/scientist candidates for the most senior leadership positions demands an understanding of the differences inherent in identifying, recruiting, and hiring these talented individuals.