

Section One

HIRING

MANAGING

RETAINING

“Of all the decisions a manager makes, none are as important as the decisions about people because they determine the performance capacity of the organization.”

—Peter Drucker, management consultant,
university professor, and author of 35 books

Chapter One

HIRING

Getting the Right People on Board

There's no such thing as the perfect, universal employee. For starters, some jobs require prior qualifications; others offer employees the necessary training after they're hired. In addition, different positions are typically filled by people with different styles and personalities. It obviously helps to have an outgoing personality for a front-desk job that involves constantly meeting patients and fielding phone calls. A shy, retiring person, by contrast, might be more comfortable working backstage and always dealing with the same people. Finally, as discussed in Chapter 5, different practices have different cultures.

As pointed out by Robert Levering in his book, *A Great Place to Work*, "No company is perfect for everyone. . . . Companies with distinctive personalities tend to attract—and repel—certain types of individuals."¹

This chapter includes a host of qualifications sought by others—which you may have overlooked or perhaps underestimated in your search for the right employees for your practice.

1 Action Step #1

The initial step in hiring an employee who is right for your practice is to prepare a written job description of the duties and responsibilities that the position entails. Such profiles will help simplify the hiring process, ensure that employees know what is expected of them, and provide supervisors with a guideline during performance reviews.

When Joe Waechter, administrator for the Medical Center Radiology Group in Orlando, Florida, started writing job descriptions, he contacted the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA) in Englewood, Colorado (<http://www.mgma.com>). “There he was matched with a practice similar to his own. Using that practice as a resource, he was given some job descriptions to use as templates for his own practice.”

Waechter also recommends using your current employees as a resource for creating job descriptions. “Ask them what they do. They may only write a line, or it may be pages and pages, but it is a starting point,” he says. “Supervisors can then glean from those employee descriptions what is necessary and what is not.”

Once Waechter and the supervisors complete the job descriptions, they have the current employees check them. “That way, if they think these are inaccurate portrayals of what they do, they can let us know,” he said.²

2 Identify “Musts” and “Preferreds”

The second step in the hiring process is to list the qualifications the ideal job applicant must have to do the job. Start with this list of “musts.” Put in writing the kind of experience, knowledge, skills, education, or whatever the candidate *must* have. Also specify the areas of pertinent responsibility the person must have handled in the past.

Paul Angotti, president of the consulting firm Management Design LLC in Monument, Colorado, urges physician leaders to develop detailed job descriptions when hiring a practice manager. To aid them, he gives physicians a list of 40 management tasks—more than most managers would be asked to tackle—and asks them to mark which ones they want their new manager to handle.

“You need to define what you want the person to do in excruciating detail so you’ll know what to look for in the person’s skill set and experience,” Angotti says.³

Keep in mind that once they’re finalized, the “musts” are inflexible and nonnegotiable. They are absolute minimum requirements.

“Preferreds,” on the other hand, include things that would be helpful and desirable but not absolutely essential to success on the job. If the list is lengthy, assign relative weights to them before you begin interviewing. Afterward, they will help you choose from among the candidates who have all of the “musts.”

The consensus of human resource professionals with whom I’ve spoken is that there should be no more than six to eight “musts.” More than that number means you have either included some “preferreds” or you’ve eliminated most of the population.

Listing job requirements in this way will save you a lot of time. Either a job applicant has all the “musts” or he or she doesn’t qualify for the job. It’s that simple.

3 Establish an “Employee Success Profile”

During the seminars I conduct on this topic, I sometimes walk around the room and ask audience members why they fired the last person they did. Typical responses include “bad attitude,” “unreliability,” and “lacked people skills.” Seldom does anyone say that a person was fired for lack of technical skill.

Ironically, technical skill is almost always the first thing listed in job advertisements and descriptions. This contradiction frequently leads to problems because although technical skills can be taught, a good attitude almost never can.

“In our selection process, kindness, caring, compassion and unselfishness carry more weight than years on the job, an impressive salary history and stacks of degrees,” says Hal F. Rosenbluth and Diane McFerrin Peters, CEO and director, respectively, of New Ventures for Rosenbluth Travel and co-authors of *The Customer Comes Second*. The formula for their company’s success, they add, “is that we have more nice people than our competition. Niceness is among our highest priorities because nice people do better work.”⁴

6 Hiring

➔**Action step:** The next step in hiring the right employees for your practice is to establish an “Employee Success Profile” for your practice. Begin this process by identifying the personality and behavioral traits that are common among your best employees. It will help you understand the type of people who thrive in your practice environment.

Add in others from your “wish list” or include some of the traits mentioned in this chapter.

Then select the five that you consider most important and rank order each of them with “1” being the most important character trait and “5” being the least important.

➔**Reality check:** Another factor to consider is how those patients with whom your staff interacts will perceive them. A highly efficient, no-nonsense receptionist, for example, may lack the people skills needed for your type of practice.

4 Involve Your Staff

Circulate the list of personality and behavioral traits to all staff members and ask each person to check the five traits he or she considers most important for a given job in your office. Discuss the results at a staff meeting and reach a consensus. Doing so will expedite your search for the right person.

There are several advantages to involving your staff in this process. For one, it makes them realize their ideas and opinions are important. It boosts their morale. It may alert you to traits you’ve overlooked or underestimated. And perhaps most significant, this list of high priority traits represents a consensus among employees themselves. As such, it applies a certain amount of peer pressure to each person to live up to these same standards. In other words, if “being on time for work,” for example, is considered an important trait, then “being late” lets everyone down—and provides added incentive for everyone to be on time.

➔**Hard learned lesson:** The more compatible a new employee is with your present staff, the better everyone’s morale, motivation, and teamwork will be.

The balance of this chapter deals with personality and behavioral traits that others deem important. It may help to clarify or reinforce your thoughts on the subject.

5 Qualities of Exceptional Employees

The following are some of the qualities that Dr. Steven L. Rasner, Cherry Hill, New Jersey, believes lead to exceptional employees:

- “Perceives himself or herself as a ‘winner.’ Look for clues that speak of one’s pursuit of individual excellence.”
- “Eagerness to learn. Not all candidates have lifestyles or a desire that will embrace continued education. Make it clear that your office seeks candidates who embrace the magic of learning.”
- “Needs to work. Staff members who need to work historically have been more interested in the team values we profess and the commitment needed in and out of the office to attain high levels of achievement.”
- “An infectious smile. People who are internally happy often carry a glow that reveals itself in a relaxed, natural and almost infectious smile. Someone once said that the morale of your office will only be as good as your worst attitude. Keep the winners—pass up the frowns.”⁵

6 A Friendly Staff

One of the first things patients notice about a practice is the ambiance. An upbeat, friendly staff is a huge plus for a practice, especially in today’s high-volume, often impersonal healthcare environment. And it’s never an accident.

Friendliness is usually easy to spot. One of the signs is the number of times a job applicant *smiles* during the interview.

Vincent Stabile, vice president of people at JetBlue Airways, says, “We don’t train people to smile. We hire people who smile. I look at people and try to ascertain their default position. If their natural default is pleasant, courteous, smiling, that’s likely to be a person who will provide the customer service we want. If someone is unhappy or frowning, or has to put on a front to engage with people, that’s not going to be the right kind of person.”⁶

➔**Hard learned lesson:** “A highly-skilled, know-it-all matriarch or pessimistic introvert,” says Dr. William G. Dickerson, Las Vegas, Nevada, “is more destructive to your practice than an optimistic and enthusiastic trainee.”⁷

7 High Tolerance for Contact

Part of every HCPs job—and even more so, their employees’ jobs— involves what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild calls “emotional labor.” It refers to the kind of work where “feelings” such as cheerfulness, warmth, and sympathetic concern are an important part of job performance—and expected by the patients with whom they interact.⁸

Having to display such emotions with one patient after another, day after day (whether or not they feel like it), is taxing—especially if patients are demanding, unappreciative, uncooperative, or otherwise unhappy about being in a healthcare setting.

Above all, such repetitive encounters require what’s called a high tolerance for contact. Those who lack it and find it uncomfortable and psychologically draining to deal with a steady flow of patients can become moody, irritable, or even hostile toward patients. Needless to say, this takes its toll on patient relations and practice growth.

“This simple concept of emotional labor,” says Karl Albrecht, author of *At America’s Service*, “explains why all of us as customers, see so much toxic behavior on the part of frontline service employees who are supposed to be giving us good service. The person we’re tempted to describe as lazy, indifferent, uncaring, and not qualified for a service job may actually be in the advanced stages of burnout because of contact overload. In other words,” he writes, “a great deal of negative behavior on the part of frontline service people is *normal behavior* [sic]. That doesn’t mean we have to approve of it or consider it acceptable, but it does mean we need to understand it and deal with it in human and humane terms.”⁹

➔**Action steps:** We need to learn more about identifying people who are more resilient to the demands of emotional labor and help those who are less resilient find work more suited to their orientation.

➔**From the success files:** American Airlines has a policy to help employees if they are ever stressed to the verge of losing control while dealing with difficult customers. Agents have the option to walk away from their positions and ask anyone to take their place—no questions asked. American would rather have an employee who is having a bad day get the help and relief he or she needs than to risk a negative customer experience.¹⁰

8 The Most Important Trait

Dr. Charles Blair, a management consultant in Charlotte, North Carolina, searches for employees with the following traits, beginning with what he considers the most important:

1. Loyalty
2. Stability
3. Enthusiasm
4. Judgment
5. Intelligence
6. Technical ability

Surprised that the top ranked characteristics are so subjective? “Creating a conscientious, effective and efficient team,” Blair says, “depends more on those personality traits than on IQ, computer literacy, or credentials.”¹¹

Samuel H. Esterson, founder of Esterson & Associates Physical Therapy in Baltimore, Maryland, and author of *Starting & Managing Your Own Physical Therapy Practice*, writes that “the characteristics I deem important for hiring anyone to work in my clinic are the following ones:

- Outstanding customer (patient or referring physician) service
- Excellent coping skills and ability to deal with stress and frustration (such as patients in pain)
- Excellent communication skills (verbal and written)
- Excellent technical skills
- Attention to detail”¹²

9 Empathy

“Working with a large healthcare provider, Gallup had a chance to study some of the best nurses in the world,” say Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, co-authors of *First, Break All the Rules*. “As part of our research, we asked a study group of excellent nurses to inject 100 patients and a control group of less productive nurses to perform the same injection on the same population of 100 patients. Although the procedure was exactly the same, the patients reported feeling much less pain from the best nurses than from the rest. Why? What were the best nurses doing to lessen the pain?”

10 Hiring

“Apparently, it all came down to what the nurse said to the patient right before the needle punctured the skin. The average nurses introduced themselves with a brisk, ‘Oh, don’t worry, this won’t hurt a bit,’ and then plunged in the needle with businesslike efficiency.

“The best nurses opted for a very different approach. They were just as efficient with the needle, but they set the stage rather more carefully. ‘This is going to hurt a little,’ they admitted. ‘But don’t worry, I’ll be as gentle as I can.’”

“The best nurses,” say Buckingham and Coffman, “were blessed with empathy. They knew the injection would hurt, and each of them, in their own style, felt compelled to share that knowledge with the patient. Surprisingly, this confession eased the patient’s pain. To the patients, it seemed as though the nurse was in some small way, going through the experience with them. The nurse was on their side. The nurse understood. So when the needle broke the skin, somehow it didn’t feel as bad as they thought it would.”¹³

➔ **Reality check:** Inpatient satisfaction research by the Gallup Organization has shown that a patient’s interaction with hospital staff members is the primary predictor of that patient’s evaluation of his or her overall hospital experience. Nurses, in particular, have a strong influence on inpatient experiences. This is clear from the individual items on Gallup’s patient satisfaction surveys that turn up as key predictors of overall satisfaction:

- Concern shown by staff
- Staff treated you as a person, not a medical condition
- Staff made you feel safe and secure
- Nurses anticipated needs
- Staff communicated effectively
- Nurses helped calm fears
- Nurses responded to requests ¹⁴

10 The Likability Factor

Some staff members are extremely personable and instantly likable; others are less so. And oh, what a difference it makes in the rhythm of

the office, the image of the practice, patient satisfaction, and everyone's "mood" at the end of the day.

A likable personality is a priceless asset, some say "necessity," in any service occupation, healthcare very much included. But it's frequently underestimated by HCPs or completely overlooked during the hiring process.

What is a "likable personality"? Bobbie Gee, former image and appearance coordinator for Disneyland, says likable people:

- Smile easily
- Have a good sense of humor
- Are great listeners
- Know common sense etiquette and use it
- Compliment easily and often
- Are self-confident
- Engage you in conversation about yourself
- Can laugh at themselves
- Are approachable¹⁵

When interviewing job applicants, pay special attention to their personalities. Do they have the above-mentioned traits or others you deem important? Ask current employees to judge how likable and friendly they are. It will raise everyone's awareness of the "likability factor" and its importance to a successful practice.

➔**Reality check:** The likability factor also works in reverse.

In his book, *Kids Don't Learn From People They Don't Like*, author/educator David Aspy writes that when students don't like a teacher, they develop a resistance to learning from him or her. Students, it seems, do best with teachers they *like*.¹⁶

Our surveys indicate the same is true in the workplace. When employees like the HCPs and office managers with whom they work, there tends to be less absenteeism and turnover, better morale and motivation, and more teamwork and productivity. And they speak openly about how much they love their jobs.

➔**Action step:** Take another look at those traits of a likable personality. Do any of them need a little polishing on your part?

11 The Spirit of Service

High performance professional practices that have a reputation for great service have a quality that consultant Karl Abrecht calls the *spirit of service*. “It’s an element of giving,” he says, “a spirit of generosity that makes people give something of themselves in addition to just doing the job. It’s going beyond the bare minimum or the standard actions. It’s being attentive to the *person* behind the need, and responding to the person more than just responding to the need. It’s being there psychologically and emotionally as well as being there physically.”¹⁷

➔**From the success files:** When the Four Seasons Hotel opened in Chicago, management was looking for employees with a “friendly nature” and a “sense of teamwork.” For 545 job openings, over 15,500 applicants were screened.

The reason the search took so long, said John Young, recently retired VP Human Resources for the Four Seasons, was “We don’t want people who think serving others is demeaning. We don’t want people who say in a crisis, ‘That’s not my job’ but rather those who say, ‘How can I help?’ We don’t want people who roll their eyes and give a long sigh when a guest requests something but rather those who’ll say, ‘No problem’—and just do it. We want people who feel good enough about themselves to be able to focus their attention on the needs of others.”

“It’s a long and expensive procedure,” Young said, “but it pays off in high employee retention and productivity. If you hire well, you seldom have to fire. And it sends a morale-boosting message to all employees, long term and new, that we recognize from the beginning how important they are.”¹⁸

➔**Hard learned lesson:** You can’t write this Spirit of Service into a job description. There’s no “script” for it. Nor do “incentives” really work. The reason is because it comes from within.

Interviewed on another occasion, John Young said: “We don’t look for applicants who can be trained to make people feel important. We want applicants who genuinely *believe* that people are important.”¹⁹

12 The Civility Factor

Yankelovich Partners Inc., one of the premier market research firms in the United States, specializes in studying consumer behavior and attitudes, often the best predictor of future marketplace behavior. Their signature product, *Monitor*[®], is an ongoing survey of 2,500 consumers, 16 years of age and older, from all parts of the country who are interviewed in their homes for two hours. They're asked hundreds of questions about their values, beliefs, and behaviors on a wide variety of topics. For example: "What is most important to you regarding customer service—that is, the way you are treated by a business or its employees when purchasing products or services?"²⁰

The results in descending order:

Courtesy	25%
Knowledgeable	21%
Friendliness	13%
Listens to you	13%
Efficiency	10%
Thoroughness	8%
Promptness	5%
Availability	5%

What's interesting about these findings is that *efficiency*, often the focus of HCPs' efforts to improve the profitability of their practices, is significantly less important to consumers than courtesy, friendliness, and simply listening to them.

Britt Beemer, author of *Predatory Marketing*, isn't surprised by these statistics. "Efficiency is not a replacement for customer service," he says. "It's only a small part of building relationships with customers. This blind focus on efficiency perfectly describes the breach between what customers want and what companies think they want."²¹

"The overriding message of these findings," Barbara Kaplan, a partner at Yankelovich Partners Inc., told me, "is that people want to be treated with *civility*. If they're not, they can and will go elsewhere."

The "civility factor," as I now call it, should be an important consideration when deciding whom to hire and what the priorities of your practice will be.

14 Hiring

➔**From the success files:** In a 2003 nationwide study of hospitals published by AARP's *Modern Maturity*, North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, New York, was selected as the number one hospital in America.²²

A survey is sent to patients' homes following their visits to the hospital's emergency department. It asks for feedback about their visits; interactions with admitting personnel, doctors, and nurses; and how (if they were accompanied) their family or friends were treated. Only three to five questions are asked about each of these encounters, requesting patients to "rank their experience" on a scale of 1 to 5 (very poor to very good).

What's significant is that every cluster of questions about interactions included a question about *courtesy*—as the first question (e.g., courtesy of the nurses, doctor, person who took your blood, radiology staff, person who took your personal/insurance information, and the courtesy with which family or friends were treated).

➔**Hard learned lesson:** "One of the lessons to be learned about service," say consultants Karl Albrecht and Lawrence J. Bradford, Ph.D., "is that the longer a business has been in existence, the more likely it is that it has lost sight of what is important to customers."²³

13 Traits That Are Often Overlooked

The following is a list of some commonly overlooked traits that HCPs attending my seminars have deemed important when hiring employees:

- Does the applicant appear to have a systematic and logical approach to work?
- How verbal and articulate is the person?
- What is the applicant's energy level?
- How effective is the person's overall presentation and impact upon others?
- Does he or she project a degree of personal warmth in interactions with others?
- Does the person seem willing to cooperate and collaborate with others in order to achieve mutual goals?
- How tactful and diplomatic does the applicant seem to be?
- Does the applicant have a positive manner and attitude?

- Is the person rather rigid, inflexible, and highly opinionated in his or her viewpoints?
- How competitive is the applicant?
- Does the applicant display initiative, drive, and resourcefulness or is he or she the type of person who must be closely supervised?
- Is the person a self-starter or one who needs to be prodded into action?
- Is the applicant a goal-oriented individual who applies himself or herself in a serious, conscientious, and purposeful manner?
- Did the applicant leave former jobs for reasonable, sound, and logical reasons?
- Has there been progress in the person's compensation?
- How ambitious and career oriented is the individual?
- Is the applicant involved with an ongoing program to improve his or her knowledge and skills?
- How well does the candidate respond to stress and pressure?
- Does the applicant seem persistent and persevering or does he or she give up easily when encountering obstacles and difficulties?
- How effective is the applicant in dealing and working with others?
- Does the applicant speak favorably of past employers and teachers or does he or she display a high degree of negativity in discussing relationships with these people?
- Does the person show patience with others?
- What is the person's "view of the world"?

"Nothing better indicates a candidate's confidence than his or her view of the world in general," writes Robert Half, president of the recruiting firm Robert Half International Inc. "Are they optimistic or pessimistic?" he asks. "Do they view the proverbial glass as half empty or half full? People with a positive viewpoint are infinitely more likely to be happier, more productive and more efficient. They are easier to motivate, quicker to learn and adapt to a variety of situations, and in general, have greater potential to become top-notch employees."²⁴

16 Hiring

Some of these traits may provide clues as to why employees with good skills and experience have not done well in your practice and what to look for when hiring new team members.

14 Do Your Own Hiring

“Checking out a job candidate’s basic skills and credentials is pretty boring stuff,” says OBG specialist Francis A. Lombardo, Winchester, Massachusetts, “but doing it yourself is the only way to be sure your employees feel as you do—about patients, and about life. You want to hire people who like the type of doctoring you do, whether it’s pediatrics, geriatrics, or ENT. You want them to be up to the pace and the special stresses of your practice, and to enjoy working with your type of clientele, whether it be upper-crust society or, as in my office, heavy on welfare and minority patients.”

“For my OBG practice,” Lombardo says, “I prefer to hire women who’ve had a baby or two, so they can relate to my patients. I’d never hire an assistant who didn’t feel as I do about childbirth, birth control or abortion, and I wouldn’t want an aide who felt obliged to scold teen-age patients who come to me for the pill, or might offend a pregnant 40 year old.”²⁵

Identifying the traits of the people who would be right for your practice is the first step in the hiring process. Finding them is the next step.

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