



Building a Solid IT Team:

Tips on Recruiting, Interviewing, and Retention

By Ward Keever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services

An important element of job success for any executive is the ability to mobilize a competent, dependable, and stable team. Unfortunately, the steps required to build and nurture such a team are time-consuming. More pressing issues always seem to be competing for your attention, and the process ends up being relegated to the back burner. For example, I always found that reviewing resumes was a chore I could never seem to get done at work. I'd take resumes home with the best intention of reading them during the evening, but family priorities tended to intervene and progress was rarely achieved. The absence of a specific deadline all too often meant that recruiting for key positions dragged on unnecessarily.

The need to build a solid team is both unquestionable and fundamental. Your challenge is to balance that requirement effectively with the many other urgent demands on your time. Here are a few ideas that worked for me in the areas of recruiting, interviewing, and retention. I hope you find them of some value as you prepare yourself for a new year.

Recruiting

Even though success depends on surrounding yourself with the best possible talent, healthcare providers tend to pay less than other organizations for one particular type of scarce resource: IT professionals. A network manager—to cite one example—may not report to you directly, but there are few positions more crucial to your ability to do your job. And yet, it's not unlikely that such key IT professionals in your company are always on the lookout for better-paying jobs with other enterprises in your community.

I once identified about five IT jobs, some of which did not report directly to me, that were highly competitive across industries. I asked my healthcare organization's HR department to conduct a salary survey for these positions across all markets in our geography. They were amazed to find out what those professionals could command at other companies. Armed with this information, I was able to make a case for upgrading the salary scales for these five positions, compete for quality talent, and retain the new hires once they were on board.

Another recruiting issue CIOs often face is the internal HR department's belief that it can fill positions as necessary, without help from external agencies. And yet, while internal recruiting is often successful, we also know of many instances where it's not. To address that issue, I worked out an arrangement with HR that specified an agreed-upon time limit for HR to fill any

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position. After that time, the position would be submitted to an outside agency, with fees charged to my operating budget rather than HR's. Subsequently, once the fees reached a certain level, HR assigned a full-time recruiter familiar with IT skills to the IT department as a means of minimizing these out-of-pocket expenses. This arrangement worked very well for everyone concerned.

Interviewing

I was once a member of a monthly poker club. We'd play for a few hours, win or lose ten bucks, and move on to coffee, doughnuts, and a different—and much riskier—game. You were dealt four cards, face-up, and required to bet on whether you could beat the next card dealt in suit. Obviously, if you had four aces, you could bet the pot. The fun came when you were dealt three high cards in three suits and a lower card in one of those same suits. If the next card dealt was from one of the three suits you had covered, you stood a good chance of winning big—depending of course on how much you'd bet. If it was from the suit you were missing, you lost.

You're probably wondering what this has to do with recruiting. Well, for me, the interviewing process was not easy. I enjoyed the conversations, but was not always able to quantify the right mix of ingredients for the optimal hire. So I played a version of the poker game described above. I evaluated the 'cards' each candidate presented in terms of four suits, as defined below:

- **Diamonds:** Is a self-motivated team player who'll mix well with our staff and constituents
- **Hearts:** Recognizes the importance of making commitments and can provide examples of delivering work on time and under budget
- **Clubs:** Knows healthcare, especially the clinical or business area for which he/she is being considered
- **Spades:** Understands the technology required for the job

In each suit, I picked the card I thought the candidate represented. For example, someone with experience installing a CIS system was the Queen of Clubs. Someone who could provide specific examples of achieving projects on time and under budget would be a high heart card, and so on. At the end of the interview I'd evaluate the four cards the candidate was 'showing', and decide what to 'bet' on hiring him or her. A high heart or diamond rating was required to stay in the running—those two criteria are essentials that can't be taught. Depending on whether the job required technical skills (spades) or healthcare knowledge (clubs), I was willing to bet on a candidate with a lower card in one of these two suits. While there are undoubtedly more sophisticated ways to make a hiring decision, this one worked well for me.



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Retention

Twice in my career, I inherited situations where the annual turnover rate exceeded 20% per year and was able to bring it down to under 3% within three years. Lower turnover rates reduce expenses and build a more dependable staff that can deliver projects on schedule. While I don't consider myself an expert on staff retention, I can attest to the truth of these general principles:

1. People want to follow someone with a vision. They want to understand where the IT organization is going and how it will be measured. They also want to feel it has the respect of the total organization.
2. Staff members value a manager who genuinely listens to them and shares their concerns about career growth. They want assignments that are challenging and offer a sense of accomplishment.
3. Staff members are looking for 'balcony people' who encourage and cheer them on.

Several years ago, I heard a definition of leadership that impressed me. A true leader is someone who "Expects a person to achieve beyond his or her own expectations, and creates the environment for that to happen." Most of us do a good job with the first half of this definition by setting due dates, quotas, and the like. But what about the second half? I encourage you to consider how you would answer that question each and every day. You might start by asking your staff members whether they believe you've taken the right steps to create an environment in which they can be successful.

Clearly, recruiting, interviewing, and retaining a competent team is challenging and time-consuming. However, it's a sure bet that you won't succeed without making your own personal investment in the process—and taking a risk or two along the way.