



Boomerang Recruitment: Bridging the Gap

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ In today's competitive health care recruitment environment, one of the most cost-effective and successful recruitment strategies is alumni or "boomerang" recruitment.
- ▶ A proven business model, alumni recruitment is just beginning to be used in a significant way in the health care arena.
- ▶ The cost to recruit alumni is much lower than for those in the general workforce and the alumni population is a known quantity.
- ▶ Alumni will assimilate much more easily into your corporate culture, will need less orientation and onboarding, and will be more productive.



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THE RECENT AND SEVERE downturn in the economy can be viewed as a positive for nurse and health care professional recruitment. During these times of economic distress, we traditionally find nurses and other health care professionals either extending hours or re-entering the workforce. Retention generally improves as well. We expect to see metrics validating

this as turnover and vacancy rates improve and time-to-fill becomes shorter.

We can safely assume that these conditions will continue for the next year or so. The current economic decline will doubtless affect all sectors of the workforce as older workers delay retirement, others postpone moves due to inability to sell their homes, and the general sense of unease causes most to hang on to their current positions.

That said, there will still be a need to fill key positions, both in the leadership arena and in specific professional and specialty groups. In today's competitive health care recruitment environment, one of the most cost-effective and successful recruitment strategies is alumni or "boomerang" recruitment. Other related

tactics are alumni-specific Web sites and alumni relations and networks.

On a personal note, I was a boomerang early in my career, having worked at a prestigious New York City area health system for a couple of years and then leaving to fulfill a dream to travel. My former employer lobbied hard to woo me back and I was offered my previous salary and benefits if I returned. Although the perks were important, I chose to return because of the incredibly supportive culture, the learning opportunities, and the sense of family in this huge health care system.

The Boomerang Concept

Boomerang is a concept developed "to identify top-performing former employees who are purposely targeted and brought back" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 66). The practice has been successful in both the health care and business worlds. Many of the top management consulting companies have utilized the boomerang concept. One firm, Booz Allen Hamilton, successfully pulled together a team called "the comeback kids" to spearhead an initiative (Sullivan, 2006). An architectural firm in San Francisco presented its boomerangs with an actual boomerang as a gift upon their return.

In health care many professional groups are primarily female, and often women leave positions to have children. Other employees leave to pursue educational goals. These groups are prime candidates for boomerang programs as their personal situations change and they begin to pursue employment opportunities again.

The boomerang concept is essentially reaching out to the best and the brightest of your former employees. The reason the concept works so well is that the audience is very targeted, pre-qualified, their work habits are known, and there are no concerns regarding a cultural fit with your organization.

Additionally, there is potentially a huge savings in training and orientation. The boomerang has insider knowledge of how things work in your organization and that all-important institutional memory. Onboarding time should be significantly shorter than for those new to the organization. And the icing on the cake? One report showed that rehires were about 40% more productive in their first quarter at work and they tended to stay on the job longer (Sergoglu & Berkowitch, 2002).

Also, the boomerang may have seen that the grass isn't really greener on the other side and this knowledge will enable her/him to be a voice for your organization among fellow employees, an advocate and

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ambassador, if you will. Add to that the boomerangs' ability to share information they have gleaned while at other organizations and you have a great source for new ideas and insights.

A 2007 survey by Bernard Hodes Group, "Playing for Keeps: Recruiting for Retention," found 21% of the 751 respondents had been boomerangs at some point. When asked what factors contributed to their return, the top reasons they cited were preferred work environment (38%), preferred work (36%), preferred compensation (35%), and preferred people/management (34%) (Bernard Hodes Group, 2007). (Note, multiple answers were allowed.)

In looking at the 12% responding who said they worked in health care, 27% reported being boomerangs. For this group, top reasons for returning were preferred work (44%), preferred people/management (33%), and preferred location (28%) (Bernard Hodes Group, 2007).

This study underscores the importance of reaching out to former employees and using them as ambassadors when they return, particularly health care workers who rate people and management highly as motivators for returning to an employer.

How to Reach Boomerangs

Before developing a boomerang program, you will need to make some internal decisions, including how far back chronologically you want to go in targeting former employees (1 year, 2 years, etc.) and also if your organization is willing to bridge employment for those former employees. Many organizations provide bridging programs offering former employees who have left within a certain period of time the same salary and benefits (vacation and sick time, etc.) they were receiving when they left. Then, depending on current and projected needs, professional groups must be identified and targeted.

One of the most effective ways to reach former employees is a simple letter or other personalized communication. In one health care system, the vice president for nursing identified former registered nurses she was interested in rehiring. She sent each a personal letter, even though many had left the state. She was successful in rehiring 10% of those contacted.

Other effective campaigns include direct mail flyers and e-cards. The messaging will differ depending on which groups you are targeting, and it is important to note that one size does not necessarily fit all. Consider developing an overall core message and then tweak it for the specific professional groups you are interested in attracting to your organization.

One health care organization developed a team to call alumni, thus reaching out in a very personal manner. There are many methods of initiating a boomerang program, and your organizational culture will dictate which method(s) you utilize.

Alumni Web Sites and Networks

John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray and Christmas, an outplacement firm, reported an increase in corporate alumni networks, formalized programs to support the Boomerang concept, beginning about 2003. These social networks for alumni began in the university sector (Zimmerman, 2006).

Alumni Web sites and networks are a great way to keep alumni engaged and interested in your organization and connected to your mission and their fellow alumni. These tools also offer an opportunity for alumni and retirees to network, socialize, sign up for continuing education offerings, and keep up to date on news, events, etc. Many organizations use these sites and networks to tap into an important source for volunteers, and some even offer job postings. Such networks and sites can be useful in developing long-term relationships after the employee has left the organization. They are more proactive than simply reaching out via a letter or email when positions are available. If alumni access your site regularly, they feel connected to the organization. Listing open positions on the alumni site encourages this group to apply.

I recently reviewed the AARP Best Employers for Workers over 50 list and was surprised to find that every non-health care company had an alumni/retiree Web site, but none of the health care organizations recognized by AARP had these sites. It would seem sites like this would be a natural for health care organizations as a means of keeping in close touch with alumni and retirees. Many health care companies do have retiree outreach programs, but alumni networks are somewhat new to our industry.

The use of alumni networks and outreach programs has been well documented in the business world. Microsoft has a group called the Microsoft Alumni Network (which operates independently of Microsoft). Deloitte lists its alumni network as one of the main buttons on its homepage and offers a variety of services to its former employees. Most of these networks require the member to sign in to access products and services. Some networks offer group rates on insurance, discounts at company stores and other retailers, and a whole host of other benefits.

Summary

As our population and workforce ages, it behooves us to arm ourselves with all the weapons available in the recruitment arsenal to attract and retain high performers. Alumni recruitment is just beginning to be used in a significant way in the health care arena. Economics alone underscores alumni recruitment as a concept that should be considered seriously by the proactive health care organization. The cost to recruit alumni is much lower than for

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those in the general workforce and the alumni population is a known quantity. Alumni will assimilate much more easily into your corporate culture, will need less orientation and onboarding, and will be more productive. \$

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