



Human Resource Solutions

Evaluating Recruitment Process Through ‘Mystery Shops’

Executive Summary

- ▶ Nationally health care facilities and systems have pulled out all the stops in developing marketing materials and strategies to meet recruitment challenges.
- ▶ Yet, are the customer’s needs being met?
- ▶ The Mystery Shop provides an alarming snapshot of the issues in health care recruitment today and serves as a cautionary tale to those in health care administration.
- ▶ A dialogue between nursing and hospital administration and those in the HR/recruitment arena will serve to determine what steps need to be taken to ensure your financial investment will yield recruitment and retention success.



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HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS OCCUPY AN ENVIABLE place in the workforce today from a standpoint of being almost universally a much sought after commodity. The aging population with its concomitant acute and chronic health care needs, combined with an aging workforce, competition from other industries for new entrants into the workforce, and

the inability to enroll interested candidates in professional educational programs due to lack of class spaces or faculty, have all contributed to a landscape quite unlike any in the past.

Health care professional shortages currently prevail in many specialty areas. Projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Hecker, 2006) and others indicate these challenges will remain for years if not decades to come. While the nursing shortage has existed for decades and has fluctuated depending on overall economic conditions, expansion of diagnostic and treatment modalities has resulted in shortages in areas such as imaging, rehabilitation, pharmacy, and laboratory. These shortages may be exacerbated in specific geographic areas due to a number of factors, but in general, we can expect to see an

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imbalance between health care professional supply and demand for the near and long term.

Responses to Shortages

Nationally health care facilities and systems have pulled out all the stops in developing marketing materials and strategies to meet these challenges head on. From the Internet to print, from employee referral programs to sign-on and retention bonuses, tactics and strategies have grown exponentially. Recruitment costs have soared as these programs and strategies have become the norm.

One would assume, given all the conditions listed here, that health care employers would move quickly in responding to applicants for increasingly hard-to-fill positions. However, sadly, this is not necessarily the case. Kalisch’s (2003) Mystery Shop research, coupled with our own work in Bernard Hodes Group’s Health Care Division, indicate recruitment process is an area of concern. What we have discovered bears noting because of its near universality-technology adding to the constraints on health care recruiters’ time, communication vehicles lacking clarity and warmth, a dearth of customer service, lack of timely response to candidates, and frustration on both sides of the human resource (HR) desk.

Evaluating Recruitment Process

While Bernard Hodes Group’s Health Care Division utilizes multiple methodologies to evaluate recruitment process (including onsite consulting projects which include collection and analysis of a variety of materials, focus groups, surveying staff, observing process, and offering process improvement recommendations), the Mystery Shop is an excellent tool to quickly ascertain how well the customer is being served.

Mystery shop components. The Bernard Hodes Mystery Shop methodology encompasses several options. The primary methods used to evaluate recruitment departments are résumé submissions and telephone calls to recruitment/HR departments. Other options include onsite visits and online candidate experience audits. The shops typically encompass 10 working days.

Résumé submissions. Typically a number of résumés are submitted to a facility or system. Résumés are created for hard-to-fill professional groups and represent “applicants” with excellent credentials and vast experience in the specific profession. We are often asked to “shop” specific recruiters or specific positions to ensure we will get a broad view of responses. Résumés may be submit-

ted by email, fax, or “snail mail” depending on client request and résumé submission policy at the particular facility or system. While we have a centralized structure for résumé submission and tracking, “shoppers” around the country represent the résumés. Shoppers use detailed forms to describe their experience during the process. The information from the shoppers’ forms is incorporated into a spreadsheet, which becomes part of the overall shop report.

Telephone calls. Similar to the résumé submissions, our shoppers contact the facility or system by telephone. Again, shoppers “represent” professionals with the ultimate in credentials and experience. They complete another comprehensive form describing their experiences from first contact with the facility or system up to the actual telephone interview with either a HR representative or hiring manager. These forms are incorporated into another spreadsheet detailing the telephone portion of the shop.

Onsite shops. Occasionally by client request we send a shopper to a facility or system to gauge whether or not an unscheduled or “drop in” candidate would be interviewed, and to gather information about the overall environment in the organization, HR or recruitment department, and all touch points with applicants.

Online candidate experience audit. This technique analyzes the facility or system Web site from the candidate’s point of view. The entire résumé submission process is evaluated, from the moment the candidate goes to the Web site to the time he or she pushes the “send” button submitting the résumé. From the look and feel of the site, to ease of navigation, to what information is housed on the site, all the nuances of the site and the applicant management system used to submit a résumé are absorbed.

Findings and Implications for Health Care Leaders

The richness of the information gleaned from these Mystery Shops cannot be overstated and can serve as a blueprint for organizations seeking to improve their recruitment process and enhance recruitment success. While we identified several organizations with excellent processes that excelled in all the following areas, we did identify a number of problems in many facilities and systems. Our findings vary from facility to facility and system to system, but broad themes were identified.

Technology/System issues. We often encounter problems with applicant management systems, including long and complicated (multiple page) forms. Some of these systems require a time investment from 45 to 60 minutes to successfully apply and/or attach a résumé. Many require inclusion of social security numbers, driver’s license information, or other personal data. Some require the candi-

date to agree to immediate background and reference checking before any response is received. Screening ranged from none to extensive questionnaires for every category of personnel.

In some cases it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the application submission was successfully achieved. It is often difficult to determine what the open positions represent (no description of the position requirements). This is often true with unit and department descriptions. Often, units are numbered or have names not indicative of what type of units they represent (medical/surgical, etc.). In some systems, applicants are required to apply for position numbers. Additionally, misspellings on the Web sites are common.

Inflexibility. Many organizations require that applicants apply online *only*. They will not accept mailed hard copy résumé nor résumés that are faxed. In one instance, a faxed résumé was mailed back to the applicant with a note indicating the facility no longer accepts anything but online applications.

Telephone calls to some organizations are not welcomed. Several organization representatives informed our shoppers that no one would talk to them until they had successfully submitted a résumé or application. Others refused to give shoppers a recruitment/HR telephone number or connect them to HR after hours. And at some organizations, there is no option except an automated operator and a complicated phone tree.

Customer service. In general, customer service appears to be lacking. During one system shop, a “20-year experienced medical-surgical RN” visiting from out of town and only available that day for interview was unable to secure an interview in any of five system hospitals. Excuses ranged from “the recruiter is at a meeting” to “we only interview on X day of the week.”

Telephone contact ranged from the wholly automated systems requiring multiple non-human interactions/steps to individuals at all touch points who did not demonstrate positive and kind responses to our shoppers. Often voice mailboxes were full, leaving the candidate no message/contact option. In a majority of cases our shoppers were unable to speak to a recruiter on the initial call.

Response times/Interview opportunity. There appears to be no real sense of urgency in responding to applicants. It typically took days and in some cases weeks before contact was made with these highly qualified applicants. In looking at aggregate data for over 100 hospitals, only 23% of our online résumé applicants were presented an opportunity for an interview and only 17% of those who called the facilities had an opportunity for an interview.

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Communications. Communications back to applicants were in many cases incomplete or confusing. Bounce-back responses generated automatically upon completion of the submission process often indicate the applicant is not to respond to the email, nor is there an option to ever contact a person. Email communications from both recruiters and hiring managers often lack clarity and have little warmth or personalization. Telephone communications yield similar findings.

Going Forward

The Mystery Shop provides an alarming snapshot of the issues in health care recruitment today and serves as a cautionary tale to those in health care administration. Technology constraints, the technology itself with its attendant daily delivery of dozens of new résumés to recruiters' in-boxes, coupled with the requisite meetings many recruiters must attend on a regular basis leave precious little time for the people part of recruitment.

When one calculates the additional time (not addressed in the Mystery Shops) of requisition generation and approval, posting time and internal transfer interviews, it becomes clear that precious time is being lost in the recruitment cycle. This contributes to lengthened days dealing with overtime, staffing gaps, and discontent among those currently working.

Recruitment is a people-intensive endeavor and our findings clearly demonstrate that despite the investment in marketing, advertisements, bonuses, etc., we are dropping the ball on the people side. We must re-examine our commitment to customer service and provide the tools and time to enable those charged with the recruitment responsibility to succeed. A dialogue between nursing and hospital administration and those in the HR/recruitment arena will serve to determine what steps should be taken to ensure your financial investment will yield recruitment and retention success. Recruiters want to succeed — let's give them the resources to win. \$

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