

Retaining Your Physicians

Start with smart recruitment strategies

by Dwight Mussleman

Typically, several factors—not just one event—prompt physicians to seek other opportunities. Although the reasons vary case by case, some of the “top” reasons are based on the wishes of spouses and/or other family members, poor economic performance, and lack of opportunity.

An effective physician retention program actually begins during the recruitment process. Many of the issues that may lead to a physician’s decision to leave a practice (or hospital) can be addressed either prior to recruitment or during the recruitment process. For example, establishing a compelling case for a physician to be added to a practice can help ensure the physician’s financial success within that practice and the availability of a challenging caseload, as well as to provide adequate time off, CME, and call coverage, among other components.

The actual recruitment process should identify whether the physician candidate is compatible with the practice environment. This decision can be made by asking not only the standard interview questions, such as practice style, professional goals, and reasons for the job change; but also by asking behavioral questions. Since past behavior is a good indicator of future behavior, ask questions that highlight how the physician candidate reacted to “a difficult patient,” “a disagreement with a colleague,” or “working in a busy clinical setting.”

“Selling” the physician candidate on the practice opportunity is important but so is “selling” the community and area to the spouse and/or relocating family members. The physician candidate will want to know about the clinical and administrative support, the opportunity for advancement—both professionally and financially—and if the program has a genuine need for the physician’s specialty. The physician’s spouse and/or relocating family members will be interested in other areas, including possible career opportunities and options for housing, recreation, and education. A successful recruitment interview includes ample time for social interaction between the physician candidate and his or her spouse and the other group and/or area physicians and their spouses. Not only does this practice help foster a personal bond, it also makes the individuals more comfortable asking and answering candid questions.

Once the physician has accepted

the position, the next step in an effective retention program is to coordinate the “pre-practice” period—or the time between the signing of the contract and the actual start date. Many people have second thoughts or experience “buyer’s remorse” after making a big decision. Therefore, a process should be established in which both administration and physicians maintain contact with the newly hired physician. This time can be used to complete credentialing, obtain hospital privileges, and resolve relocation issues, as well as to begin an orientation program, assign a mentor, and develop a marketing plan to introduce the physician to the community.

Once the new physician starts to practice, the next step in an effective retention program is to implement a comprehensive orientation and mentoring program. The orientation program should not only welcome new physicians to the practice, but should also give them the necessary tools so that they can quickly become contributing team members. Welcoming gestures—such as lab coats, name tags, name plates, parking passes, receptions, and dinners—are all important in making the new physician and family feel a part of the practice and community. In addition, the new physician should be given adequate knowledge of the physical plant, training on the computer systems, and understanding of the protocol for ordering tests and labs and making referrals.

In addition to making the new physician feel welcome and supplying the individual with the necessary tools and training, it is important to establish a clinical mentor. A good mentor will be able to answer the physician’s questions; provide acceptance, coaching, counseling; help establish expectations; set tangible goals; offer advice; act as a role model and advocate; and have frequent and planned communication with the new physician. Planned mentoring and communication will help the new physician learn the business-side of medicine, the culture of the practice and community, and how to successfully practice medicine in the chosen setting.

Bottom line—when new physicians know what is expected of them and how they are performing, they become committed, focused, and loyal to the organization. ■

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