Hiring the Right Healthcare Practice Manager: Advance Planning Limits Risk
The selection of a high-quality practice manager is one of the most important elements in building a successful medical practice. Ensuring that managers are qualified, competent, and dedicated to the delivery of safe, cost-efficient care is the sole responsibility of a medical group. An impetuous hiring decision may lead to costly missteps in the form of inefficient workflows, miscommunication, regulatory noncompliance, and dissatisfied patients. Careful planning helps lessen the likelihood of these and other adverse exposures, and is a primary determinant of successful hiring.

The following strategies are designed to help physicians and other providers enhance the hiring process and reduce risk by identifying applicants who fit practice needs:

**Define the position**

Whether comprised of a small group of physicians or multiple provider types, the complexities of running a medical office demand that practice managers possess both business and clinical acumen. Prior to the hiring process, draft an accurate job description, including general duties and responsibilities, specific tasks, and knowledge and skills requirements. The description serves as a guide to evaluate applicants’ experience and skill set. Stated requirements should be reasonable and clearly outline actual job functions, such as:

- **Manage finances**, e.g., prepare annual budget and budgetary guidelines; determine expenditure requirements for equipment, facility and new service decisions; and oversee coding, billing, and collection activities.
- **Execute human resource functions**, e.g., recruit, select, and train non-physician staff; supervise and direct the work of all employees; conduct performance reviews; offer educational and job expansion opportunities for personnel; and handle terminations of non-physician staff.
- **Act as physician/provider liaison**, e.g., identify practice needs and areas of future growth; prepare agendas and data reports for management meetings; execute projects as directed; complete reports to federal and state agencies; coordinate necessary surveys; interpret citation-related data for the practice; and negotiate contract terms and fees with major insurance plans.
- **Facilitate marketing and networking activities**, e.g., manage patient portals and the practice website; recruit tele-medical partners; and advertise with referring practices and regional networks.
- **Coordinate facility and equipment management**, e.g., negotiate equipment and property leases, as well as contracts for supplies and services; draft business contingency plans; and coordinate location moves, if necessary.
- **Handle conflicts and complaints**, e.g., reinforce the employee code of conduct; implement zero-tolerance policies for specified violations; create educational and counseling programs in response to conflicts and other disruptive offenses; foster a non-punitive reporting environment; enforce sanctions in a consistent manner; and track and respond to patient complaints.
- **Pursue self-development**, e.g., attend managerial-level and other educational programs; join professional associations; and subscribe to industry journals.

In addition, require newly hired managers to indicate in writing that they have read the job description, reviewed it with the appointed practice representative, and understand what is expected of them.
Identify desired characteristics

Prioritize the personality traits that providers and staff are looking for in prospective candidates. For example, an applicant should be compassionate, an effective communicator, a natural leader, and detail-oriented in task performance. In job postings, describe with specificity the ideal candidate, e.g., “looking for an experienced, articulate, and personable practice manager” instead of “a practice manager is needed for a fast-growing medical clinic.”

Outline requirements for education, experience, and skill

The educational background of a practice manager largely depends upon the size of the patient population and the scope of business and clinical functions to be performed. In most instances, practice managers hold a college degree and above. Previous experience in running medical office operations – preferably three to five years – is highly desirable, as is a demonstrated proficiency with healthcare rules, regulations, software systems, and emerging technologies.

Administer pre-employment tests to candidates as a means of confirming their stated skill proficiencies and behavioral attributes. For a basic verbal and math skills test and a screening tool for personality traits, see “Pre-Employment Testing for Health Care Providers” at http://www.criteriacorp.com/customers/health_medical_pre_employment_testing.php.

Utilize online resources to advertise the position and screen candidates. Once the medical practice has created a specific and targeted advertisement, post it within a specialty online community.

Setting up an online forum for applicants to submit their resumes is an efficient and economical way to pre-screen candidates for their basic qualifications, such as education, work experience, and salary history. Online commercial recruitment outlets allow hiring personnel to quickly narrow the applicant pool prior to expending precious time and resources on preliminary telephone screenings.

Conduct background checks

Inquiries should be verified and thoroughly documented, including education, credentials, and references. Criminal background checks should encompass an applicant’s conviction history as well as sex offender status.

Prepare interview questions

Before conducting an initial face-to-face interview, draft questions in advance. Behavior-based interview questions help physicians and staff ascertain whether candidates possess the requisite integrity, decision-making ability, communication skills, and empathy. Open-ended questions that focus on past experiences prompt discussion and help reveal the applicant’s values and thought processes. The following inquiries can serve as a starting point:

- What do you like best/least about your last position?
- What examples do you have of being in a professional leadership role?
- What three adjectives best describe you?
- Have you ever worked with difficult or demanding physicians? How did you resolve these personality conflicts?
- When have you encountered an inefficient workflow practice or clinical process, and how did you improve it?
- How would you react if a patient told you he or she was upset with the care they were receiving from the medical practice?

In addition to behavior-based questions, pose situational-related inquiries to gain further insight into a candidate’s personal judgment and critical thinking skills. Consider the following example: “A policy change regarding mandatory after-hour call documentation was recently implemented. Compliance data reveals physicians and other medical providers are not entering a summary note or signature in the designated electronic health record field. How will you address this deficiency with providers and motivate them to change their practice?”
Hold an all-day interview

Some medical practices will offer their final candidates an all-day interview and compensate them for their time. The experience provides top applicants the opportunity to learn about the practice, observe operations, interact with staff, and ask questions. At the conclusion of the day, practice partners poll physicians and staff for their thoughts, perceptions, and concerns regarding a candidate. The feedback is often insightful, thereby permitting a more informed hiring decision.

Heed red flag warnings

While candidate screenings and interviews are the chief methods relied upon in determining whether to hire someone, there are certain warning signs that may signal potential weaknesses in a candidate. Remain vigilant to the following red flags during the interview and selection process:

- Unprofessional or inappropriate telephone etiquette.
- Arriving late for an onsite interview.
- Not wearing proper business attire or poor hygiene.
- An aloof demeanor and/or vague responses to questions.
- Premature inquiries into the compensation package and/or required hours of work.
- Negative comments regarding prior employers and colleagues.

The complexities of running a medical practice can be significant. Hiring an effective practice manager is paramount to the success of the practice. A thorough and deliberate hiring process can help ensure that newly hired managers are well-qualified for their job, aware of practice expectations, and committed to the common goal of providing safe, quality care.

Additional Resources


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