Weathering the IT Workforce Shortage
By Timothy J. Tolan

Taking a second look at recruitment and retention strategies can help your organization meet its technology leadership needs.

Timothy J. Tolan

The health care industry will generate 3 million new jobs between 2006 and 2016, more than any other industry, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. While health care is one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy, an aging workforce has led to a shortage of qualified workers, creating one of the most challenging issues that health care senior management now face.

As health care organizations increasingly invest in information technology to improve patient care, who will fill IT leadership positions? Government mandates, the need to demonstrate a return on technology investments, an aging workforce and the looming talent shortage have combined to create tough competition for human IT capital in health care organizations.

Growing Pressure

IT affects every aspect of how a health care organization delivers care. The health care IT leader, typically the CIO, is responsible for one of the most resource-intensive areas in the hospital. Second only to personnel costs, health information technology spending has surpassed capital allocations for medical equipment and physical plant maintenance. Compounded by pay-for-performance programs and other initiatives that determine how clinicians are paid and how hospitals are funded, successful implementation and adoption of IT provides data that is crucial to a health care organization's bottom line.

Consequently, the role of the health care CIO has evolved.

Once in charge of word processing and system servers, today's CIO is a strategic thinker with an understanding of how large-scale IT decisions that automate health care delivery affect the organization's overall business operations. Most CIOs need to demonstrate that the capital outlay for advanced technology increases efficiency, improves quality, reduces medical errors, boosts employee and physician satisfaction, and enables adherence to changing regulatory benchmarks.

Rethinking Recruitment

The generation of talent entering the senior-level health care workforce is bright, IT savvy and looking for positions that effectively use technology. To take advantage of these newcomers' skills, a health care organization needs to hone its hiring strategies to recruit the most promising talent.

To best navigate the murky waters of recruitment, selection and retention of qualified candidates for C-suite positions, health care organizations should adopt the following hiring techniques: keep an ear to the ground, challenge existing notions of the right candidate, and use innovative incentives. What's more, they must recognize that the one quality shared by the best and the brightest is an affinity for a challenge.

Keep An Ear to the Ground

Smart senior executives are always recruiting and networking. Use these opportunities to evaluate the talent in the marketplace. Even if your organization is not looking for a senior technology executive at the moment or contacts in your network aren't looking to make a job change today, make it a priority to develop a candidate pipeline in case situations change on either side.

Next, consider how your hospital is marketed to potential candidates. Their first impression of your organization is based on the tone and spark of the ads you place through executive search firms, on Internet job boards, and in health care newsletters and journals. Let potential candidates know what your organization is really about—your philosophy and business practices. Ensure that every member of the interview team discusses the organizational culture and what the culture means to them with each candidate. Having a future co-worker describe what it's like to work in your organization is the most effective way to communicate its culture.

Most CIOs will tell you that while compensation is one of the main reasons that they will consider changing organizations, the key reason for leaving is a lack of communication with their CEO or other direct supervisor. Demonstrate that your hospital promotes teamwork, accountability and open lines of communication among senior level management. For example, if you have an "open door" policy, discuss how senior management welcomes new ideas and suggestions from employees and share a situation where an employee suggestion made a positive impact on the organization.

Recognize the Right Candidate

In most cases, the ideal job candidate does not exist. No one person has the attributes, experience, image and compensation requirements to fit a job profile. Waiting to fill this position can have financial and opportunity costs. Additionally, the job description of the CIO has changed. It's important to recognize that a potential candidate might not have the traditional background of chief information officers of the past. The key is to seek out a talented leader who can relate to the institution's business cycle, cost systems and strategic business goals in addition to managing technology initiatives. This person may come from any number of industries; financial services, insurance or consulting candidates all have transferable skills. Pay close attention to those unique skills that can be used creatively in your organization. And, consider pairing the new CIO with a director-level position that complements, instead of duplicates, his or her skill mix.

Use Creative Incentives

How well does your organization motivate its employees to achieve its initiatives? Minimize the effect of the workforce shortage by creating a business culture that induces leaders to come and stay by offering creative but measurable challenges to keep them happy.

One of the CIO's main challenges is demonstrating a return on technology investments. Hospitals should design a compensation plan that includes retention bonuses and financial incentives based on the leader's ability to track the improvements made by IT implementations. Incentive plans should reward success and innovation.

Be creative and incorporate your strategic goals in the skill mix when recruiting. The fierce competition for top IT talent in this tight labor force is a fight that your institution can win by developing a strategic plan for talent acquisition.

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