

## **Meeting the Challenge of the Surgeon Shortage: Three Approaches That Work**

By Tony Stajduhar

The shortage of surgeons will become more acute in 2013 and beyond as the pool of board-certified generalists and specialists in fields such as orthopedic surgery and neurosurgery grows smaller. But there are ways to ensure you tap the available supply to meet your staffing demands.

It's not so much a matter of trying new approaches. Rather, the solution lies in applying new techniques to traditional best practices that HR professionals have always used to find the best employees and the best fit to the position at hand.

A little fine-tuning can go a long way in meeting even the toughest recruiting challenges today.

### **The Perfect Storm of Challenges Is Brewing**

By and large, the surgeon shortage is the result of two converging social trends—ongoing stagnation in the growth of residency programs since the mid-1980s, and the skyrocketing growth of the senior population in the United States as Baby Boomers get older, coupled with their pursuit to live longer than their predecessors.

Other factors are taking a toll as well. The Affordable Care Act and the evolution toward value-based, wellness-focused care are pointing toward primary care as the largest area of growth for young physicians, and are keeping the surgeon pool under-populated. What's more, many healthcare plans and quality initiatives are now stipulating that surgeons be board-certified. This shrinks the pool further. Medical Marketing Service (MMS) data from the American Medical Association is instructive here. It shows that only about 55 percent of the 26,000 general surgeons in the United States have that certification. Of the 23,000 orthopedic surgeons (the largest specialty-surgeon group), 73 percent are board certified. The gap is larger for the 5,400 neurosurgeons in the country, only 64 percent of whom are board-certified.

Factor in the nearly 20 percent of graduating surgeons who are international students and want to take their expertise back to their native countries, plus nearly 40 percent of practicing general surgeons who are 55+ and eyeing retirement, and you have a perfect storm of HR challenges brewing in this vital healthcare segment. MMS data shows that specialties track the general surgeon age profile fairly closely: Of orthopedic surgeons, 41 percent are 55 and older, and of orthopedists, 36 percent are 55 and older.

The surgicalist trend—where hospitals hire surgeons to work an entire shift in much the same model as the hospitalist trend—is also tapping the available supply of surgeons for private practice physician groups.

One silver lining is that the recession put a lot of retired surgeons back to work. Like many American employees, they lost significant shares of their investments in 2008. As the economy improves, however, more and more of them will go back to the retirement they saved for.

## **Strong, Proactive Recruiting Techniques Are Needed to Compete**

How do you overcome the trend and find qualified surgeons to staff your healthcare organization? It's a dilemma that isn't easily fixed—at least until someone figures out a way to grow surgeons on trees, or, more realistically, if the U.S. government finds a better way to recruit physicians from outside its borders. Today, regulations are stringent on the acceptance of who can practice and who can't, and it's very rare to find physicians moving here who have no residency or post-graduate training in the United States.

Bottom line: Everyone will be going after the same limited surgeon pool, so you need to be really good at what you do from a recruiting standpoint. Here are a few guidelines.

### **1. Be internally proactive**

As an HR professional, you not only need to work harder to get the attention of those surgeons who are available to fill the positions you need to fill, but you also need to be more internally proactive, too. This means getting to know your current pool of surgeons very well, and have a clear understanding—as much as possible—of how long they intend to stay with you. You should start recruiting efforts at least two years ahead of the time you know a position will be vacant.

Many surgeons are reluctant to commit to such a timeframe. Still, it's perfectly fair to ask them to indicate what their thinking is along the lines of retirement. Two years from now? Five? A direct approach works best. At medical staff meetings, make attrition planning an agenda item and be forthright about your recruiting plan. Discuss your need to start early to fill staff vacancies. Ask older surgeons if they feel comfortable sharing their retirement plans so you can ensure continuity of care in your facility. Ideally, you should be working on a five- to 10-year recruitment plan that addresses the issue of retirement among your current staff. Let people know you are not asking for a permanent commitment but a ballpark estimate.

### **2. Be competitive**

In addition to having a clear understanding of your current surgeons' retirement likelihoods, also ensure you have the right mix of surgical specialties for the population you serve.

Armed with this insight, and the knowledge of how many positions might become vacant in the near future as surgeons retire, you have a solid profile of your surgical staffing needs.

Now, be sure you have a good plan for searching in place, and stick to it. First, develop a great job description with a clear set of expectations, and a bio describing what your

community, your hospital or your practice have to offer—a sales piece that is better than anyone else's. For example, if you're in a rural community, focus on safety, schools, and a good place to raise a family.

A DVD providing a quick tour of your facility and your community can be very effective. Include comments from your CEO, your director of surgery and director of nursing. Augment this with a packet of information to have ready at the candidate's hotel when he or she comes for an interview. Materials from the local Chamber of Commerce, a welcome letter from the CEO, even a basket of cookies can help distinguish you from the pack and reinforce the message that your facility and your community are a welcoming.

It also helps to be aware of the changing mood among surgeons today. Years ago, many of them were fearless, looking for positions where they didn't have to answer to anyone per se, knowing if the opportunity didn't work out they could find a similar or better one somewhere else. Those days are gone. More surgeons today want security because the economic future is uncertain, and finding that security trumps salary and a spirit of independence any day. It's the reason more and more surgeons are seeking employment with hospitals today—the reason fully 80 percent of the surgical jobs leading recruiting companies fill are hospital-based.

Also, be sure security is part of the package you are offering. Make sure when the candidate is on site that you answer every question. Understand that a move is one of the most stressful experiences in life, and do everything you can to minimize the stress and make the decision a comfortable one.

Finally, when things click with the right candidate, be ready to move quickly. Be sure all your key decision makers are present and in agreement. Have a contract ready to go and everything in place, so when the right candidate walks in the door, you can have him or her sign on the dotted line.

### **3. Think outside the box**

Effective HR professionals acknowledge reality. They understand that, despite their best efforts, the right fit for an available position just might not be there at the right time. And they look for ways to make the most of the surgeons currently on staff.

This could mean hiring more "physician extenders"—nurse practitioners, physician assistants, etc.—to keep your surgeons doing what they do best: surgery.

You also should be sure your operating rooms, and your overall hospital patient throughput, are functioning as efficiently as possible. Technology applications are available to help you orchestrate and synchronize surgeries and other patient procedures throughout the day, ensuring that the right resources for anesthesia, housekeeping, etc. are all in place to do their jobs quickly and avoid delays between procedures. They can show every pertinent step after a patient's admission, so the facts can be available to all authorized personnel for planning and scheduling purposes. Georgia-based Care Logistics, provider of one such

system, reports that 10 of its partner hospitals have realized more than \$120 million in collective value from the efficiency they have gained in patient throughput.

### **Success Can Be Yours**

Recently, there have been numerous scenarios where HR scored big points in bringing in qualified surgeons to fill immediate needs. In every case, the recruiters were well prepared. They started early. They did a good job selling a community that might not have been the candidate's first choice. And they did their homework when it came time to offer a competitive salary, benefits—and job security—in these uncertain times.

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