



Recruiting and Retaining Diagnostic Imaging Center Staff

A Diagnostic Imaging Center White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Diagnostic imaging centers (DICs) want to hire talented, dedicated, and knowledgeable radiologists and staff who want to establish long-term careers and work toward building the practice and providing high-quality services. Therefore, hiring the right employees to begin with – ones who fit well with the practice – is clearly the best staffing strategy. But trends in radiology and a shortfall in qualified professionals are making this difficult.

This paper discusses strategies and tactics that DICs can use to attract, hire, and retain the radiology professionals who best suit their practices and help meet business goals.

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The ratio of job openings to qualified candidates is approximately 3.8 to 1, with a deficit of about 600 radiologists across all specialties.

A RADIOLOGY PROFESSIONAL SHORTFALL

While many experts differ in their approach to addressing the shortfall of radiologists and allied health professionals, everyone agrees that the shortage exists and has a significant effect within the profession and throughout the healthcare system. General radiologists, radiology sub-specialists, administrators and technologists are all in short supply for a variety of reasons, making recruiting and retaining professional staff a demanding task for most DICs and prompting some professionals to make large demands of potential employers. The shortage is greatest in rural areas and areas without tort reform. While there is some indication that the shortfall is abating, most agree it is not going to disappear in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, the demand for radiological services is increasing rapidly. General population growth, the increase in the number of elderly patients, and the wide availability of information about specific radiological procedures mean that more patients are demanding more services. The increase in available imaging services and procedures, along with a litigious climate, means that doctors are requesting more diagnostic procedures.

Radiologists

According to the American College of Radiology (ACR), currently the growth in the number of radiologists is 2% per year, while the demand for radiologists is growing by 3.5 – 5% per year. The ratio of job openings to qualified candidates is approximately 3.8 to 1, with a deficit of about 600 radiologists across all specialties. General radiologists, in particular, are in short supply, as new radiologists are choosing more lucrative careers in specialized new imaging areas.

A major cause of the shortage is the reduction in the number of radiology programs in medical schools and residency opportunities. The push in medical education during the 1990s to turn out primary care specialists under the managed care model, the threat of declining reimbursements and salaries in the field, and the consequent significant drop-off in the number of medical students wanting to enter radiology programs led to the reduction of opportunities for training.

Technologists and Allied Health Professionals

Today, the technologist shortage is estimated at 15.3%. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that more than 100,000 new technologists will be needed over the coming 10 years. At the same time, more than 60% of current technologists are expected to leave the field over the coming 10 years. Many experts believe a technologist shortfall has always existed and will continue indefinitely, even though there are signs that the shortage may be easing slightly as more students enter training programs. However, today, many of the same factors driving the radiologist shortfall, particularly the growing volume and diversity of radiological exams, are pushing the shortage to a new level.

The shortage in technologists also points to a shortage in the candidates for the new radiologist assistant (RA) positions, as these positions are filled by technologists with additional training and education.

ATTRACTING QUALIFIED CANDIDATES

The lack of qualified professionals combined with the increase in demand compels DIC executives to develop marketing programs to attract qualified candidates. The programs can consist of a number of activities and techniques, which are described in the following sections, and can also include strategic partnering with third-party recruiters and educational programs and marketing your state-of-the-art equipment to applicants of interest.

Additionally, competitive salary and benefits packages are key considerations. But today a growing number of radiology professionals are looking at a range of factors before deciding to accept a position.

Practice Culture

The main consideration for radiology professionals when considering a position is that they want to work with great people who treat them fairly and with respect and appreciate their work. The culture of the practice must support its professionals and create an efficient, pleasant working environment. Professionals want good management and communication within the practice. They must feel that the practice meets their skills and interests and that they share the goals and vision behind the practice. The workplace itself must be clean, attractive, and well organized.

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that more than 100,000 new technologists will be needed over the coming 10 years.

Radiology professionals frequently cite lack of current technologies—MRI as well as CT, in particular—as a major reason they would turn down a job offer.

Quality Technology

High quality imaging equipment is a major draw for all radiology professionals and will make a practice more attractive to potential employees. Naturally, radiology professionals place a high value on working with sophisticated new technology to take advantage of superior image quality as well as faster and more convenient workflow and to expand their skills to stay in the forefront of their field.

Radiology professionals frequently cite lack of current technologies—MRI as well as CT, in particular—as a major reason they would turn down a job offer. Technologists, in particular, look for opportunities to cross-train in CT and MRI. Installing an advanced CT or a 1.5T MRI will make a practice significantly more attractive to job candidates. Some DICs make purchase of a new modality or more modern equipment part of the hiring package for a particularly desirable professional.

Naturally, the purchase of this equipment will also have to be justified on business and clinical levels. An examination of a practice's current referrals may reveal that a new modality can be supported within the existing patient base. Or, acquisition might be part of an overall plan for growth that will attract new clinical staff, while at the same time expanding clinical procedures and patient base. The revenues from the increased procedures will help defray the cost of the new equipment.

High-quality, advanced technologies will provide compelling workflow automation features that can help even new technologists become "super techs." For example, state-of-the-art MRI technology eliminates time-consuming re-entry of patient exam parameters, allowing users to duplicate processing by dragging and dropping an existing image from the workstation browser into the patient list, and speeds workflow by initiating processing during – rather than following – an exam.

DICs that invest in multiple modalities will be well served to look for equipment that shares a common interface across modalities. This will significantly cut user learning curves and enhance ease-of-use.

Most radiology professionals also want an information infrastructure that supports their work to provide efficient workflow and eliminate many of the tedious tasks that can be involved in radiology department operation and management. For many radiology professionals, a Picture Archiving and Communication System (PACS) is a workplace requirement. A PACS provides digital storage and management of medical images,

speeding workflow, enabling flexible teleradiology from virtually any location and allowing referring physicians fast, secure digital access to image information within and often outside the hospital.

A key part of PACS-driven workflow is the elimination of the film developing process and costly and time-consuming hard-copy file rooms. This has significant appeal to technologists in particular, who are no longer burdened with these responsibilities and can pursue more challenging aspects of their jobs with a PACS in place. Many imaging centers have found that the savings in the costs of film, developing supplies, image file room space and management rapidly offset the cost of a PACS.

Opportunities for Growth and Development

Radiology professionals want to grow both personally and professionally through their work. Opportunities for learning new technologies, pursuing continuing education, attending conferences, and developing along a career path are essential.

Most radiologists look for a clearly defined path to partnership, often spelled out in a contract, along with profit-sharing and a sense of ownership in the practice.

Many technologists look for the opportunity to become certified in new modalities or to advance to become an administrator or radiologist assistant.

Flexible and Reasonable Scheduling and Work Loads

The reasons most often given by radiology professionals when leaving a practice – or when leaving the field altogether – are oppressive workloads, inflexible schedules and poor working conditions. Many practices have developed a number of ways to mitigate these problems; those practices that have not may find it difficult to attract the candidates they want.

Nighthawk services. Radiologists identify being on-call at nights and on weekends as the worst part of their profession. At the same time, the growth in demand for imaging services has created an overwhelming workload. Nighthawk services utilizing consulting radiologists to read studies remotely have been developed to ease these burdens. Digital images may be sent using a PACS, Web-based DICOM communications software or teleradiology program. A position requiring fewer nighttime shifts will be more attractive to radiologists who will appreciate the ability to sleep at home.

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Many radiological professionals look for the use of technology that increases the efficiency of a practice.

Use of radiologist assistants and technologist aides. To help facilitate the work of their professionals and to keep them from being overworked, practices may hire additional types of personnel.

The American College of Radiologists recently approved the position of *radiologist assistant*. Most frequently, the radiologist assistant will be a technologist who receives advanced training and who, working under the supervision of a radiologist, takes on more challenging responsibilities. These may include helping with patient assessments, management, and education; making initial image observations; and performing selected procedures. This new position is seen as a way to both provide a career path for technologists and make radiologists more productive and efficient.

Many practices have also started to hire *technologist aides*, who perform many of the non-technical tasks for technologists, reducing their work load and increasing their efficiency.

Use of technology. Many radiological professionals look for the use of technology that increases the efficiency of a practice. Advanced technologies and software that facilitate workflow, reduce the amount of paperwork, and increase throughput are very important in attracting candidates.

Flexible scheduling. Many practices are allowing their professionals to use flexible schedules to suit their needs, interests, and lifestyles. Flexible schedules may allow choosing shifts, hours, and types of assignments; they may promote such arrangements as job-sharing and part-time work.

Some hospitals use a *shift-bidding system*, which has been shown to be very attractive to professionals. In this system, a hospital posts its open work shifts on the Internet or its own intranet. Employees or external professionals are then allowed to bid on the shifts that they want.

Compensation and Benefits

Radiologists. Leading recruitment professionals suggest that salary or guaranteed earnings should be in the range of \$300,000 to \$500,000, depending on location, experience, and area of specialization. Many compensation packages also include bonuses or fee-based incentives. Most benefits packages include health care coverage, retirement plans, insurance (including malpractice), and vacation time (from 4 to 12 weeks). Other benefits may include tuition reimbursement or onsite child care, and relocation packages.

Technologists. According to the American Society of Radiologic Technologists (ASRT), in 2004, the median annualized salary for technologists ranges from \$40,000 to \$70,000, depending on location, experience, type of facility, and modality. Experienced technologists in some fields may make as much as \$95,000. Many compensation packages also include bonuses.

Most benefits packages include health care coverage, retirement plans, insurance, and vacation time (from 2 to 4 weeks). Other benefits may include tuition or CME reimbursements, child care, subsidized meals, recognition programs, and transportation.

Community Factors

Naturally, radiology professionals are interested in living in a community that matches their lifestyle and standard of living and provides the cultural, social and educational opportunities they want. Some prefer urban living, while others like a suburban community. Practices may want to stress any particularly appealing features of the community when trying to attract professionals.

Radiologists may also look at the community in terms of size, drawing area, referral base, and economic and demographic patterns. These factors will point to the financial status of the practice and will suggest the likelihood of future growth and success.

THE RECRUITING PROCESS

For all radiology professions, the recruiting process requires identifying candidates, conducting interviews, and negotiating a package. The specific tactics and considerations in the process may be different for radiologists and for technologists and allied healthcare professionals.

Radiologists

Finding candidates. Given the shortfall in available radiologists, it has become very difficult to identify candidates who match the needs and culture of a specific practice. The most practical and reliable way is to ask current radiologists for recommendations. Not only will they know many other radiologists in the area personally, but they will also have a good sense of the capabilities, personality, and suitability of each.

The practice may also want to establish a relationship with residency programs, under which they can evaluate up-and-coming candidates. Some practices may establish scholarships for radiological residents or may work out loan reimbursement programs for candidates who join the practice.

An increasingly common way to identify candidates – particularly young, technology-savvy candidates – is through the Internet. The practice’s own web site may list opportunities, or the practice can list opportunities on other appropriate web sites, such as an association’s web site. It may be particularly appropriate for a practice looking for a specialist to list a position on that specialty’s association’s web site. A practice can also use the Internet for web casts in which candidates can talk with current professionals, ask questions, hear testimonials, and view the facility.

Practices may also place advertisements in appropriate publications. Advertisements tend to be a more costly way of attracting candidates, so practices may want to make sure that they are getting the return they want for dollars spent. Other ways to find candidates include using third-party recruiters or employment agencies, attending trade shows, and cold-calling.

Increasingly, practices are taking a longer-range view and are trying to build a pipeline of candidates by attending job fairs and career programs, and talking with student groups. While the payoff from these activities may not be seen for many years, practices may indeed find that they have built the awareness and respect that leads to more radiologists in the future.

Interview process. The purpose of the interview process is to find a good fit for a position in terms of skills, interests, and personality. The interview process works both ways: The practice uses the interview to determine whether a particular candidate meets its needs, while the candidate uses the interview to determine whether this practice, facility, and location are attractive, meet lifestyle requirements, and provide the desired opportunities.

The interview process starts with one or more discussions. The interviewers could be an administrator, human resources person, the head of the practice, or other radiologists in the practice. Interviews themselves can be structured (in which set questions are asked) or unstructured (in which topics are covered, but the interviewer has flexibility to match the questions to a particular candidate). For a radiologist position, unstructured interviews may be better. They allow interviewers to probe, learn about the candidate’s thought processes and personal style, and find out how the candidate handles professional situations and interacts with peers. They also give the candidate the flexibility needed to ask the questions that will really help him or her learn about the practice and the community. Some practices make sure that at least one of the interviewers is a peer with whom the candidate will be working regularly. For these interviews to be valuable, each should last about one hour.

After the series of interviews, the candidate should spend at least one day working in the practice. This day is the candidate's chance to evaluate the technology used in the practice, observe procedures and management, get a sense of culture, and work with local patients. The practice can watch the candidate's style of interacting with other professionals and patients, get a sense of the workload the candidate can handle, and judge the candidate's personality. This day is the "make or break" part of the interview process. Interviews themselves can be somewhat artificial, and make it difficult to truly assess a candidate; but job performance can be actually observed, work conditions and culture can be experienced, and both sides can get a real sense of the fit between candidate and practice. At some point in the interview process, the candidate's references and credentials should be checked. The interview process ends with the decision whether or not to make an offer to the candidate.

Key negotiation factors. At the time of the job offer or shortly thereafter, the candidate and the practice will negotiate and agree on the terms of employment. Salary, benefits package, job responsibilities, and career development are all discussed. Given the shortfall in availability of radiologists, practices have found it necessary to give more during the negotiation than they did in the past; but it is important for the practice not to let the costs of the employment package or the concessions about work conditions distort the human resources of the practice as a whole. A candidate may ask for extensive vacation time or high financial incentives, but if these requests are out of line with what other radiologists are receiving, the practice may find those other radiologists walking out.

Some of the standard factors in negotiation for a radiologist position are: amount of vacation time, bonuses, the possibility of becoming a partner in the practice, the types of support staff (including a radiologist assistant), flexible schedule, use of a nighthawk service, loan forgiving or tuition reimbursement, and types of ongoing training.

Technologists and Allied Healthcare Professionals

Finding candidates. Some of the ways used to find radiologists can also be used to find these other professionals. Personal referrals again may be the best way to identify candidates that match the culture and needs of the practice. Some hospitals and large practices have established formal Employee Referral Programs, under which people who refer candidates that are hired receive rewards, such as gift certificates or cash.

Practices have also found it useful to establish ties to training programs and colleges. Some have established scholarships or are providing loans or tuition to students on the understanding that the students will work for the practice. Others are paying for their own employees to go back to school to get the training to become a radiologist assistant.

Practices may take part in trade shows, job fairs, career days, and similar programs attended by suitable candidates. They may advertise in publications read by the candidates. Some have found that, if there is a particular opportunity or advantage in the practice, a carefully-targeted direct mail campaign may reach good candidates.

Interview process. The interview process for technologists and allied healthcare professionals is similar to that for radiologists: The candidate will talk with one or more people, including at least one peer; and then the candidate will spend a day or more working in the practice. The candidate's references and credentials will be checked. The goal of the process is the same: To find out whether there is a good fit between the needs and requirements of candidate and practice.

For technologists, it may be common to use more structured interviews. One interview technique often used involves asking the candidate in-depth questions that try to really find out how the candidate thinks and what the candidate wants. Candidates may be asked to describe how they have acted in specific circumstances or to specify what they are looking for in professional relationships or to state what is important to them personally and professionally. In these interviews, the interviewer listens for complete, thoughtful answers and tries to gauge the candidate's listening and interpersonal skills.

Another common technique is behavioral interviewing. Practices using this technique will create a detailed description of the technical and interpersonal skills needed by a candidate for a specific job; during the interview, they will ask specific, probing questions to find out whether the candidate has all of the needed skills. Frequently, candidates will be asked to describe in detail how they have performed in situations similar to those they would encounter in the new position; or they will be given problems to solve or asked to describe how they would act under certain conditions. The interviewers are looking specifically for transferable skills and for the ability to function well in the practice. At the end of the interview process, the practice will decide whether to offer the candidate the job.

Key negotiation factors. At the time of the job offer or shortly thereafter, the candidate and the practice will negotiate and agree on the terms of employment. Salary, benefits package, and job responsibilities are set out and other aspects of employment are discussed. Again, the shortfall in availability of technologists has led practices to be generous to candidates, but practices cannot establish an employment package that is too out of line with those for other technologists.

Some of the standard negotiating factors for a technologist's position are: career development opportunities, tuition reimbursement, flexible work arrangements, variability of assignments, support by an aide, and bonuses.

MANAGING THE RECRUITING PROCESS

It takes a lot of time and effort to identify candidates, run the interview process, develop the employment package, and negotiate with candidates. The practice may or may not want to do this work itself. There are both benefits and disadvantages to conducting the recruiting in-house or turning it over to a third-party recruiter. The decision about how to conduct the search may depend on how ready the practice is to handle the process, whether the practice has dedicated human resources personnel, whether there are qualified candidates in the area, how quickly the position must be filled, and how much time and money the practice can spend on the search.

Managing the Process In-House

The practice may decide to involve doctors in the recruiting process or to allow an administrator or human resources staff member to manage the program.

Physician-directed recruiting. If the practice decides to manage the recruiting process itself – for both radiologist and technologist positions – the physicians in the practice will have to spend a great deal of time at it, time that then cannot be spent working with patients. The revenue of the practice may decrease, and the physicians may resent the imposition. A benefit, however, could be that the practice may do a better job of assessing the skills and qualifications of a candidate and could more easily figure out whether the candidate would fit into the practice.

Human resources recruiting. Large imaging centers may have a human resources or administrative specialist who may handle recruiting. If these professionals take over the recruiting, the physicians will be able to concentrate on providing radiological services. Human resources personnel are good at determining the fit between a candidate and the job, have procedures in place for conducting searches, and have the time to consider all the factors in the decision. However, human resources personnel may not fully understand the requirements of a particular position and may not be able to give the search top priority.

Using a Third-Party Recruiter

Involving a third-party recruiter raises the costs of the search and may not yield the best fit between a particular candidate and the practice or the job. Using a third-party recruiter, however, has many advantages. These recruiters work constantly with the market, know what's going on, have resumes on file, can draw on a pool of candidates from many geographic areas, and may be able to fill a position quickly. Additionally, these recruiters can take the burden of the process off of the practice; the recruiters may do everything from identifying candidates to handling the interview process to negotiating and structuring the employment package.

The third-party recruiter must specialize in the health-care field and must be committed to radiology. The recruiter should participate in professional radiology activities by having booths at trade shows, advertising in and possibly publishing articles in trade journals, and having a web site dedicated to radiology. Practices looking for a third-party recruiter can identify one through these activities, by asking other practices and local hospitals about recruiters, and by observing the quality of candidates placed by each recruiter.

ADDRESSING STAFF SHORTAGES

Given the shortfall of all types of radiology professionals, it may be necessary for a practice to use a variety of ways to staff its operations. Some of these ways have already been discussed, including using nighthawk services, hiring radiologist assistants and aides, and shift-bidding.

Another common way is using a staffing company that specializes in temporary or short-term radiology personnel, whether technologists, radiologists, or others. These companies employ radiology professionals, handle human resources matters (such as

salary and benefits) for those professionals, and place those professionals in temporary jobs according to a practice's needs. This arrangement has many advantages. It allows a practice to hire only a core staff and can then fill in with the temporary professionals to meet short-term demand, cover low-volume procedures, or handle other situations. This is often a cost-efficient and practical way for a practice to handle staffing.

On the other hand, consistent use of temporary professionals can be costly. The staffing company might not be able to provide a worker with the skills the practice needs, and the practice may spend too much time teaching the various workers the practice's basic workflow and procedures.

Another possibility is hiring temporary workers through Internet-based locum tenens services, which supply long-term temporary radiology staffing for an agreed-upon time period. This option has the same advantages and disadvantages as using a staffing company.

Other ways to address shortages include asking staff to work overtime, asking retirees or technical staff from the community to fill in, or using creative scheduling (such as job-sharing or part-time arrangements) to accommodate workers who would otherwise leave the practice.

STAFF RETENTION

Generally, people leave jobs for the following reasons:

- They do not get along with their managers or fellow employees.
- They do not find the work challenging.
- They are not provided opportunities for growth and development.
- They are neither rewarded nor recognized for their work.
- Their salary and benefits are not competitive in the market or industry.

Three factors have been shown to be most effective in retaining employees: recruiting for the long-term, creating a supportive work environment, and following through on commitments.

Recruiting and Retaining Diagnostic Imaging Center Staff

Given the time, money, and effort required to hire appropriate radiology professionals, placing significant emphasis on retaining those employees is a sound business practice.

...the most important reasons people stay in their jobs are that they enjoy working with others in the practice and the practice's culture supports, recognizes, and rewards them.

Recruiting for the Long-Term

The employment package can be structured to build in incentives for a professional to stay with the practice. For example, instead of paying a sign-on bonus, the practice could pay retention bonuses. Or the practice could make tuition reimbursements contingent on staying with the practice for a number of years. Or the practice could make specific career development and learning opportunities part of the conditions of employment.

Creating a Supportive Work Environment

As noted above, the most important reasons people stay in their jobs are that they enjoy working with others in the practice and the practice's culture supports, recognizes, and rewards them. While a practice cannot control all of the aspects of its work environment, it can take many steps to make that environment as pleasant as possible.

An important step is training supervisors and managers in good management techniques. These include ways to support smooth and efficient operations, resolve employee conflicts, and maintain good morale. Many management experts suggest that managers spend time just walking around the premises every day. This allows managers to find out the concerns of employees, fix problems early, and communicate frequently and directly with employees.

Another step is to conduct employee satisfaction surveys, which may uncover problems and may point to ways to improve the environments. Practices should also develop procedures for recognizing and rewarding employees. The procedures can include formal bonus programs and other benefits, recognition in the in-house newsletter, comp time, an annual awards celebration, or gift certificates.

Practices should also focus on the career development of each employee. This may include developing formal job descriptions and career ladders, and working with each employee on a plan for career advancement. It may also mean making sure the practice keeps up with technological developments and uses up-to-date equipment and procedures. As noted above, radiology professionals want to work on advanced, state-of-the-art equipment and expanded applications technology supporting their workflow; they look for opportunities to learn new modalities and procedures. The more technologically advanced the practice, the more the professionals will feel that they are advancing in their careers.

Above all, creating a supportive work environment means making sure that all aspects of the practice contribute to a culture that makes employees glad they are part of that practice.

Following Through on Commitments

All the planning, procedures, and negotiations mean little if the practice does not nurture its employees. There needs to be trust among the members of the practice, a sense that the practice means what it says and will carry out its promises. Trust is developed through actions and not words, so it is essential for the practice to meet its commitments in relation to its employees.

The practice can demonstrate its commitment by giving employees time to get that training, hiring the promised aide, giving the promised rewards, playing fair in negotiating employment packages, and so on.

Employees are far more willing to cope with job stresses, heavy workloads, and temporary problems if they feel they are being treated decently and fairly and if they trust their employer. Building that trust is the most important retention tool a practice can use.

CONCLUSION

DICs are finding it difficult to hire the talented, dedicated, and knowledgeable radiologists, technologists, and staff they need due to a shortfall in available personnel. But there are many actions DICs can take to attract, recruit, and retain the employees they need.

While compensation and benefits are important, candidates are also attracted by a supportive and pleasant work environment, the ability to work with the latest technology, opportunities for growth and development, and manageable work schedules. The recruiting process (finding candidates, interviewing them, and negotiating employment packages) should feature these aspects of a practice and make sure that both practice and candidate agree that there is a fit between the needs and interests of both. DICs will also find that these factors are important in retaining employees, in addition to following through on commitments made to employees and building an atmosphere of trust between the practice and its radiology professionals.

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All the planning, procedures, and negotiations mean little if the practice does not nurture its employees.

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