



remarks

Has a Headhunter Called You? Some physicians may feel the need for caution when they get a call from a recruitment firm. Knowing what to expect and what to avoid will give you confidence in working with recruiters.

BY CALVIN BRUCE



Imagine this scenario: You arrive back at your office after lunch and check

your voice mail. An unfamiliar voice says that he was referred to you by a colleague and has something important to discuss with you as soon as possible.

Aha! You guess that it's a recruiter wanting to pitch an opportunity. Should you return the call? Depending on your previous experience with headhunters, you may choose to make contact immediately—or decide it probably isn't worth your time.

If, on the other hand, you don't have much experience

working with recruiters, how do you decide whether or not to proceed? Along with trusting your gut instincts, the experience of other physicians can help you decide.

The good and the bad

Dr. Sheldon Kalmutz, a locum tenens psychiatrist in Boca Raton, Florida has had some good and some poor experiences working with physician recruiters. Since 1992, he has worked off and on with seven different agencies and has a few war stories to share. One

in particular involves his being sent to a facility with less-than-honorable ethical practices.

"My first day on the job, I was asked to sign off on a 10-month back log of patient files in order for the facility to collect insurance payments. Not having treated those patients, I refused to be a party to such a scheme. I immediately informed the recruiting agency that I would not work in such a setting. To my surprise, they were not as supportive of my position as I as-

sumed they would be."

The recruiting agency was later closed by the state.

On the flip side, Dr. Kalmutz has had many positive experiences working with physician recruiters with good ethical and professional standards.

"I especially appreciate working with recruiters who show a personal interest in me, and do not regard me as an impersonal placement commodity," he says. "The recruiters I have in mind provide thorough information, which I can take at face value. That makes me more comfortable when I take their locum tenens assignments."

Dr. Ahmad Mahrou, an ob/gyn in Moreno Valley, California also has had favorable experiences with a medical recruiter.

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"For over a year, I had been trying to move from private practice to a hospital setting," he says. "Then I got a call from a recruiter. He discussed an opportunity with a prominent regional medical center that I would not have been aware of otherwise."

The interview went well and Dr. Mahrou received an impressive offer. He says the recruitment firm gave him professional and personal service throughout the process. "Not only was the recruiter prompt and polite in returning my calls, he also set the stage for the interview and offered to be of help in seeing things through to successful completion."

Building rapport

Physician recruiters are like any other professionals. Some are well-trained, competent and perform their jobs with utmost efficiency. Others make placements on a trial-and-error basis. In working comfortably with recruiters, it's important to be certain that they know the industry, fully understand your career objectives, and will accurately represent your interests throughout the search process.

Asking a few pointed questions up front will help build such confidence. Specifically, in returning a headhunter's call, you should ask direct questions:

- **How did you get my name, and what did the person tell you about me?**
- **Generally speaking, what kind of clients—and opportunities—do you represent?**
- **Is this a retained or contingency recruiting assignment? In a retained assignment, the recruitment firm is paid a retainer to begin the search and the balance of the placement fee when the client hires one of the candidates presented. In a contingency assignment, the search firm receives no payment until one of their candidates accepts an employment offer. Either scenario may**

work for a physician in a given instance. However, in retained searches, the recruiter has greater control over the hiring outcome because she knows all the candidates are coming from her firm. Clients often give contingency search assignments for a single position to more than one agency. Thus, contingency recruitment can be more of a "numbers game," with recruiters offering a parade of candidates in order to get one hired. Since retained searches are exclusive arrangements, recruiters are much more selective in who they present as candidates.

- **Tell me something about your firm. How many physicians in my specialty have you placed in the last several years?**

The purpose of such questions is not to come across as arrogant. Rather, it will help you determine whether the caller is someone with whom you can comfortably discuss personal matters such as your work history, your family situation, relocation options, compensation issues, and so on.

Good recruiters won't mind being asked such questions. They will appreciate thorough information-gathering on your part: it's what they are trained to do. Furthermore, good recruiters know that candidates who are selective in working with headhunters are less likely to display fickle interest when presented with employment opportunities. Thorough physicians tend to be more decisive and cooperative when pursuing an opportunity. So choosiness on the part of the physician is a good sign from a recruiter's standpoint.

For the same reasons, smart recruiters typically ask questions that "cut to the chase" during an initial conversation. Their intent is not to invade the physician's privacy. Rather, headhunters need to determine right away whether a prospective candidate's qualifications and interest level warrant moving forward in the search process.

If you and the headhunter have a good rapport and are comfortable work-

ing with one another, it makes sense to investigate the opportunity that prompted the phone call. In so doing, it's appropriate to define mutual goals and expectations.

Defining Expectations

Physician recruiters are paid to make quality placements. Their job depends on enlisting the trust and cooperation of highly qualified candidates and clients who are willing to pay placement fees for specified recruitment services. The process works well when all parties understand their responsibilities and everyone else's expectations.

The National Association of Physician Recruiters (NAPR), an organization of recognized recruitment firms, publishes information on practice standards, unacceptable procedures, and fundamental responsibilities of recruiters, clients, and candidates. These principles are available on the group's Web site (www.napr.org).

Gil Johnson, the former president of the NAPR, says the organization aims to encourage the best practices among its members: "We are engaged in the practice of building companies and advancing careers. Our organization represents a membership dedicated to the highest level of ethical standards and practices in those endeavors."

If you choose to work with a headhunter, there are certain things you should expect from her.

- **Accurate information concerning bona fide employment opportunities.** Beware of recruiters who lure you with a "golden opportunity" that doesn't pan out. After discussing the specifics of a given opportunity, you and the recruiter may decide it's not the best match and nix the idea of pursuing it. However, if you are constantly "baited" with employment come-ons and then

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“switched” to a less appealing opportunity, it’s probably wise to stop working with that recruiter. If it’s a genuine opportunity, the headhunter should provide enough information about the practice, the key players, and why the job is professionally appealing for you to interview with confidence—and with a good chance of getting an offer.

• **Enthusiastic representation of your candidacy.** The reality of physician recruitment is that recruiters must offer more than one candidate to a client in order to fill a position. Presenting one candidate who gets hired is rare. The law of averages dictates that the odds of making a placement increase exponentially when a second and third candidate are presented. This means that as excited as a headhunter may seem regarding your background, she is also screening other doctors for the same position. With this in mind, it’s important to get a feel for how your candidacy stacks up with others. During your conversations with the recruiter, you should be able to determine whether you are perceived as a leading candidate or a suitable backup candidate. If you’re unsure, ask the headhunter directly how she views your candidacy in relation to others who have interviewed, or will be interviewing, with the client. You should receive a candid response. If you are considered a strong candidate, then you should expect your candidacy to be represented enthusiastically.

• **Prompt feedback throughout the search process.** As occupational matchmaker, the recruiter is in an ideal situation to understand the thoughts and feelings of two parties who court each other during the interview process. A key responsibility of this position is to provide timely and accurate information to both parties as the search process unfolds.

Although he doesn’t have a crystal ball, the recruiter knows what serious concerns have been raised at either end. He should allow you the opportunity to fully explain any questions that arise after your interview. Similarly, he should voice to the client your misgivings about the position. If it’s to be a good marriage, both parties need to be thoroughly convinced of their compatibility without any lingering doubts.

A candidate’s responsibility

There’s a flip side to this discussion. As a candidate, you also have certain responsibilities to the recruiter. In order to do his job effectively, a recruiter needs certain things from a candidate—namely honesty, cooperation, and commitment.

• **Be truthful.** From your initial conversation with a recruiter, it’s in your best interest to be candid about your career goals and employment and relocation preferences. It makes the recruiter’s job easier if he is confident that you are a qualified candidate who is sincerely interested in the opportunity under discussion.

If your interest is marginal or you absolutely would not consider making a career move, then be honest with the headhunter. Or if you’re seriously considering a lot of opportunities, say so up front. The headhunter will appreciate knowing all the facts before expending considerable time and energy on behalf of someone who is apparently only kicking tires.

• **Cooperate fully.** Recruiters work hard to make placements. Their time is as valuable as yours. When a recruiter makes the effort to place you in an exceptional opportunity, she expects you to cooperate as much as humanly possible, particularly by honoring times arranged for telephone and on-site interviews. Cooperation also involves providing prompt feedback after interviews,

as well as informing the recruiter of anything that would have a bearing on the ultimate outcome of the placement process.

According to Johnson, good communication is vital to successful recruiting. “In today’s market, timing is everything. All too often, busy physicians and administrators convey the wrong message (or fail to convey the right message) to each other by not responding in a timely manner.” When that happens, says Johnson, 9 times out of 10, the interview process fails.

• **Demonstrate commitment.** Nothing is more irritating to a recruiter than helping a candidate get a good employment offer, only to see it rejected for suspect reasons. It’s like a matchmaker planning for a big wedding that’s canceled at the last minute. It’s frustrating to see so much hard work come to naught.

Obviously, there are legitimate reasons why certain jobs are turned down. But when the headhunter perceives that a candidate continually rejects bona fide offers for the wrong reasons, the working relationship is strained. He will be less likely to represent that physician in the future.

There’s no mystery to working successfully with physician recruiters. When a physician and recruiter have good rapport and mutual expectations are honored, a physician can expect to receive the offer that suits him perfectly.

With that thought in mind, don’t hesitate to return a headhunter’s phone call. Who knows? It may be the turning point in your personal and professional life. ■

Calvin Bruce serves as senior staff writer with J&C Nationwide in Atlanta. He has previously contributed to Unique Opportunities and to Web sites such as WebMD.com and MedCAREERS.com.