

HR's 2015 Challenge

THE RECENT ECONOMIC RECOVERY, COMBINED WITH HEALTHCARE REFORM, COULD POSE PROBLEMS FOR RADIOLOGY BUSINESSES SEEKING TO ADD SPECIALIZED STAFF.

BY LENA KAUFFMAN



As the U.S. economic recovery grows, jobs have been added at a brisk pace. February marked the 12th month straight that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported job gains were above 200,000.

For the healthcare sector, which did continue to add positions throughout the recession, economic recovery means that organizations used to fairly ample pools of job applicants may find increased competition for top talent in 2015. For radiology businesses that seek to expand staff, there also is concern about finding the right people with radiology-specific knowledge. How to respond to increased competition for talent, find the best people, and retain them once hired is therefore top priority for many radiology business owners and human resources managers at this time.

Kim Sisk, PHR, SHRM-CP, is the HR/credentialing manager for Canopy Partners, a radiology management service organization that was spun off from Greensboro Radiology in Greensboro, N.C. Last year, she grew her own organization's staff by nearly 20 percent and her firm also helps other radiology businesses with HR issues.

So far, the pool of candidates with the hard and soft skills necessary for customer service positions remains adequate in her area, she reports. However, she is finding that filling positions for physician credentialing coordinators and



certified coders is proving tricky.

“Radiology is a very specialized area,” she explains. “It was very difficult to find the people who had the radiology coding certification (RCC). We ended up having to branch out and just get someone with a general coding certification. We ultimately ended up finding a good candidate, but it took several months to get the candidate in the door.”

With the coming need not just for the RCC, but also expertise in International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th edition (ICD-10) coding, the shortage of credentialed coders may only get worse, predicted Kathleen G. Bailey, CPA, MBA, CPC, CPMA, CPC-I, CCS-P, an RBMA U faculty member who teaches traditional and online coding, health IT, and administration subjects.

“There are a lot of people out there who are going to need good coders trained in ICD-10, and the training for ICD-10 is not cheap,” she says.

Data and IT Skills Are In Demand

Hiring of an IT specialist can also prove tricky. Sisk stated that her company ended up enlisting the help of a professional recruiting firm to fill its need for IT specialists.

Healthcare, and particularly radiology, is a very specialized area of IT with numerous concerns not common to general business IT, says Carol Hamilton, MBA, SPHR, FACMPE, and chief administrative officer of West County Radiological Group, Inc., in St. Louis, Mo.

According to Hamilton, who also teaches HR topics for RBMA U, one example of how health IT differs from regular IT is the care that must be taken to safeguard Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protected personal health information (PHI). Her practice has its own IT person on staff, and given the growth in using electronic medical records with advanced functionalities — which doubled between 2009 and 2013¹ — has made his services so sought after that the practice actually encourages him to help other organizations as long as they are not other radiology businesses.

“I’m seeing that there are more requests for actually having IT people on staff,” Hamilton says. “It is much more so than days past when it was perfectly acceptable just to outsource that need and have someone come in on occasion when a computer wasn’t working.”

Hiring of business analysts with radiology knowledge is less of a concern at an individual radiology practice level than hiring IT specialists. Hamilton notes that she

has personally not tried recruiting a health data analyst yet because the advanced business software programs currently available are meeting her group’s need for business intelligence.

“Quite honestly, the software that is available to go with either different practice management systems or that you can buy on your own are so amazing these days that it is better in those cases to get someone who is a bit more forward thinking within the group up and trained to look at that,” she says. “But if you don’t have someone within the group with that forward thinking for data analysis and who is able to read reports and look at trends to figure out what is going to be happening in the future, then you are much better off looking outside.”

Practices that do need to hire a health data analyst or engage a data analysis firm may find themselves in competition with big hospital and health system networks that have a growing need for business intelligence and quality reporting as they begin participating in population health models and various systems that link care quality to reimbursement.

“People who can take information and turn it into business intelligence are in high demand because what is happening right now is that hospitals need a lot of data analysis to look at things like length of stay and quality initiatives,” Bailey says.

Furthermore, the analysts can’t just be number crunchers with generic skills and no background in medicine, Bailey adds. “These analysts need to understand healthcare in order to understand the data they are looking at, otherwise it is going to be garbage in and garbage out.”

What Attracts Job Candidates

With more competition for talent even as reimbursement is cut, what can radiology businesses do to effectively recruit and retain people with specialized skills?

The good news is that while offering a competitive salary and benefits package with health insurance, paid time off, and a strong retirement plan (very important), these types of traditional compensation are not the only things employees are looking for. Sisk, Bailey, and Hamilton were in agreement that potential employees also value environments where they can grow and advance in their careers.

Sisk is proud of Canopy Partners’ low turnover rate, which she says is only 7 to 8 percent. “A lot of what keeps people here is our culture,” she says. “We highly encourage teamwork, we highly encourage communication. Even

though we have separate departments, all of our departments work cohesively together to problem solve and to innovate and to come up with solutions to help our clients.”

Through regular staff meetings, there are avenues for everyone in the company to have a voice in decision making and bring forward suggestions. This creates a feeling of ownership, Sisk says. In addition, Canopy Partners has a mandatory program that trains managers in effectively leading employees.

“The way you are going to retain employees is if they are happy and they are heard and if they feel like they are part of the team,” Sisk says. “To retain you have to look at your culture. Be honest about it and if your culture is not where you think it needs to be, start addressing it.”

Sisk says that Canopy Partners views efforts to create and maintain a positive company culture as an investment that pays off “tenfold.” Their culture was not an accident. They spent countless hours meeting with employees and managers to learn as much as they could about what was working and what was not within their organization. Then they developed a plan that addressed the top opportunities for improvement.

“You need to talk,” Sisk says. “You need to have an open and honest conversation with your staff.”

Supporting Education as a Strategy

Offering continuing education is another area that can set a radiology business apart when recruiting for coding, IT, and other in-demand skills that may require maintaining certifications and learning new information each year to keep up with the field.

“If you have somebody you want to retain, one of the important things I’ve found is that you provide continuing education,” Bailey says. “We are tight-fisted in radiology, and as radiology reimbursements have gone down over the past few years, I’m seeing that is kind of a continuing trend. However, you need make sure your people get the continuing education necessary to stay current in the field. You need them to have that skill as much as they need to maintain that skill for themselves.”

Education benefits can take the form of traditional tuition support as well as paid time for taking classes. Using online options, like RBMA U, can make funding continuing education more affordable. In addition, don’t neglect paying for certain employees’ association memberships, re-certifications, and relevant conferences,

Bailey says. This is especially true for higher-level people with very specialized skills.

“Our IT person wanted to go to a conference that was all about hacking,” noted Hamilton. “It was not the usual type of training we provide, but it made him that much more aware of things to look for on our system and, if he was going to go help another group, things to look for on their systems. We are open to new areas if employees want to go into something that expands their knowledge rather than just continuing education to keep the same certifications.”

She adds that all of her group’s coders have already earned their RCC and they are now working on earning their Certified Professional Coder (CPC) credentials in order to be able to do even more types of coding. In addition, the benefits of helping employees earn additional certifications and become more skilled far outweighs concerns that they might take those skills and move on to an outside opportunity in Hamilton’s view.

“I really don’t have any fear that anyone is going to be able to offer the same work environment that we can offer,” she says.

Finally, consider ways you may help your most in-demand talents achieve a better work-life balance. When it comes to the fields of credentialing coordinators, coders, and IT personnel, some of the work can often be done remotely and many employees appreciate the benefit of being able to do some of their work from home, says Sisk.

Through Canopy Partners’ work-from-home program, employees have the option of working regularly from home once they’ve passed a 6-month long period of working exclusively in the office as a new hire. The probationary period allows them to become fully trained in their job so that when the transition to working from home happens, it is seamless and invisible from the customer’s perspective, Sisk says.

Working from home allows employees to avoid time spent commuting to work and avoid taking time off for life’s minor inconveniences, including everything from a cold, to waiting for a package delivery, or a school snow day. The system also has advantages for Canopy Partners—although there is a small investment in the technology necessary for employees to work from home, the company is saving money by reducing the need for office space, says Sisk.

Retaining Your Recruits

The elements of a positive company culture, career growth support, and non-traditional supplementary benefits like work from home are also key to retaining talented people. The last thing a hiring manager wants after spending months filling a position with the right candidate is for that person leave for an even better opportunity within a year.

The risk of losing someone is quite real, notes Bailey. She trains about 80 to 100 people at a time in her classes and many do not have a healthcare industry background. These students need to get their foot in the door at a healthcare organization, but once they do and amass a year or more worth of healthcare experience, they are going to be recruited, Bailey says.

In professional HR circles, the passive recruiting trend is hot. Passive recruiting, where recruiters approach people who are employed and not actively looking for a new job to see if they would be interested in switching companies or know of someone who is, has long been used to fill executive and other leadership positions with highly specialized skills. Now, career networking social media tools are enabling easier and faster recruiting of passive job candidates in non-executive roles. Recruiters simply search online profiles for specific certifications and message people whose profiles reflect skill sets they are searching for. LinkedIn's Talent Solutions even offers employers "recruiting tools to expand your candidate search and find and engage the best passive talent."

In addition, you want to make sure your salaries do not fall behind the market, which can happen in positions where demand for qualified candidates is rising sharply. Canopy Partners does a bi-annual market analysis on salaries to make sure the company is competitive in salaries in all of the areas it serves and for all of its positions, Sisk says.

If you cannot afford your own analysis, reach out to associations that track salaries in their fields, such as the AAPC (American Academy of Professional Coders) annual salary survey, adds Bailey.

Growing Your Own

Of course, another option in filling positions requiring hard-to-find skills is to train someone already within your organization for the job. There is not always someone available that has the interest in getting the additional training necessary to fill the position, but when there is, it can be a good option says Bailey.

"You have to know if you have a person with the abilities to learn those skills," adds Hamilton. "That doesn't always happen."

The key to making this work is to know exactly what your skill need is and your timeline. Depending on what is needed, it can take months and a considerable investment to train the employee for the new job. On the other hand, it can take months and a similar considerable investment in job ads and professional recruiter support to land a qualified outside candidate and then get them on board.

"It is what is going to be most efficient," Hamilton says.

One thing that does give radiology employers pause when considering paying for training an existing employee for a new position is the issue of retention, says Bailey, who herself managed radiology practices for 15 years before going into education and consulting. What she did as a radiology manager was ask her employees interested in gaining specific coding certifications and moving up within the organization to sign an agreement that they would reimburse her for the cost of their training at a graduated rate if they decided to leave the organization within two years. If they left immediately after having earned their certification, they had to repay the full cost of their training, but if they stayed close to the two-year mark, they only had to repay a portion.

People with highly specialized skills have always been hard to find, and radiology businesses will certainly adapt to increased competition for skilled employees. To find the right combination of strategies for your business, take stock of the resources available to you, and be clear about what specialized skills you need and pursue the options that will work best for you. ■

RESOURCE

1. Furukawa MF, King J, Patel V, Hsiao CJ, Adler-Milstein J, Jha AK. Despite substantial progress in EHR adoption, health information exchange and patient engagement remain low in office settings. *Health Aff.* 2014 Sep;33(9):1672-9.



LENA KAUFFMAN

is a freelance writer and editor based in Ann Arbor, Mich. A graduate of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, she has served as a reporter and editor on multiple medical trade publications over the past 12 years. In addition, she has worked in public affairs and communications for the Palo Alto Medical Foundation in California and for Sutter Health. She is a contributing writer for the RBMA. Lena can be reached at lena_kauffman@yahoo.com.