



Spotting the yellow flags—and dealing with them

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Physician recruitment professionals know the red flags—many jobs of short duration, gaps in training or employment, or an abrupt end to a previous job. Recruiters follow up on these issues as a matter of course.

But what about the yellow flags—the things that don't seem quite right or give recruiters a feeling that something is off or not adding up? Following up on these nagging items is just as important because even the smallest of yellow flags might evolve into a red flag.

“We are kind of psychologists and investigators at the same time,” says Michael Griffin, a clinical recruiter for Sound Physicians in California and Nevada. “We are the dragnet before they get in the organization.”

In the worst-case scenario, not investigating a yellow flag could lead to a bad hire. However, there are other less dire but unfortunate outcomes that can overcomplicate the process or hurt an organization. “If you move candidates [with yellow flags] along the process and your physicians get to them and find these problems, then your physicians are beginning to not trust you,” says Donna Loy, senior human resources business partner at Penn State Health St. Joseph.

Nobody wants to lose the trust of their physicians and leadership. The good news is there are easy ways to suss out common yellow flags early in the process, so they can be cleared up.

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Potential Yellow Flags

Many physician recruitment professionals use a standard screening tool when they first talk to candidates. This ensures that every candidate is asked the same set of questions. It also makes it easier to detect when someone doesn't want to talk about something, which might indicate an issue that needs addressing.

The following are a few areas to pay attention to during the screening process with candidates.

→ *Yellow flags cont'd on page 20*

Communication and Listening Skills

“The number one thing I find as a yellow flag is communication,” Griffin says. He gets concerned when candidates don’t communicate clearly, don’t follow up on time, or get things confused. Bad communication skills are often a sign of low emotional intelligence, he says.

Griffin’s company, Sound Physicians, conducts the reference check, the background check and a call with the lead chief before candidates get to the interview stage. This process takes a couple weeks, and he’s clear with every candidate about this schedule. However, some still persist in requests for an immediate interview. “That tells me that they aren’t listening to me. They only have their own needs in mind,” Griffin says. Griffin will often give new graduates the benefit of the doubt and will take extra time to review the process again. If doctors are willing to listen, he doesn’t hold it against them.

But, he goes on to explain, “If it’s someone who’s been out of training for five or six years, that’s a huge yellow flag. They think they are the center of the universe.”

Avoiding Certain Topics

If a candidate doesn’t want to talk about a particular job or if an answer to a standard question is very short or abrupt, that could be a yellow flag. “Sometimes they seem to be drawing me someplace else,” Loy says. “You ask the question and they don’t answer. So you let them go that way for a little bit, and then you bring them back to the question. Anything that feels funny you pick at.”

Loy’s yellow flag alert is also triggered when a candidate doesn’t want to give her a reference for his or her current job. “I don’t want to risk your job, but there must be someone I can talk to,” she tells these candidates. When she eventually obtains the reference and calls that person, she will ask an open-ended question about the candidate and then patiently and silently wait for the full answer. “That way people tell me more—and they do.”

Lack of Clarity on Goals

The last thing Griffin asks about in his screening interview is goals. “Is this a forward-thinking person that we can invest in and advance? Or is this someone who just wants to do this for the money and that’s it?” A lack of goals can indicate a lack of passion for the work.

Similarly, he notes if candidates have volunteer experience or a passion for their specialty and work. If the candidate is only focused on what they do not want to do and don’t seem to have a passion for the work, they probably will not be strongly considered.

Processes to Find and Deal with Yellow Flags

It only takes a slight change in the standard protocol or a little extra legwork to figure out if a yellow flag is a big deal or nothing to worry about. Here are some possible process tweaks to help get to the bottom of a yellow flag.

Be Flexible about Timing of Reference Checks

When a yellow flag appears, often the best course of action is to talk to someone at the applicable program or job. Therefore, being flexible on when to conduct the reference check is key.

“If it’s not a reasonable response [from the candidate], then we might check references a little earlier in the process,” says Melanie Mrozek, physician recruiter and senior consultant for Banner Health Physician Recruitment. Normally, she checks references at the end of the hiring process.

Google and Bing Everyone

Recently, a placement agency presented a locums candidate to Loy and she mistakenly assumed the company had already done a preliminary screening. This doctor sailed along the hiring process, but before the offer, she googled him and discovered he was currently involved in a major lawsuit and had lost his privileges at a hospital. She now does an internet search for each candidate early on.

It’s also wise to conduct an internet search regarding anything on the CV that you are not familiar with. Mrozek recently screened a candidate from a medical school that isn’t ACGME-accredited, but she only realized that when she researched the program.

Keep Asking Questions

It’s important not to ignore any nagging feelings about a candidate at any point in the process. If Mrozek feels like she didn’t get to the bottom of something in the screening interview, she’ll often follow up with an email to address any open concerns and to seek clarity. She will state, “In the screening, I made some notes about this, but I wanted to inquire a little further to see if you can give me a little more information.” She tries to pull answers out of them and get it in writing.

“You’ve got to trust your gut,” Mrozek continues. “If there’s something more to it, it’s worth investigating a little further.”

If a yellow flag is indeed a red flag, figuring out sooner rather than later will always be to a physician recruitment professional’s best course of action. Everyone else involved in the recruitment process will appreciate receiving the most vetted and appropriate candidates.