

Boston Business Journal

Volume Twenty Two, Number Ten

April 12-18, 2002

©2002 Boston Business Journal, Inc.

ON THE FLY *with David Mead-Fox* Finding the hospital CEO

It's not easy running a hospital these days, which makes it even harder to recruit executives to take on the job. Often, people don't realize that a recruiter like David Mead-Fox, managing director of the Boston office of Korn/Ferry International, is behind a successful hire.

Recruiting isn't a perfect science, Mead-Fox explains to reporter Allison Connolly. In fact, it depends on a number of variables, including the recruiter's gut instinct.

Q: *Times in the health care industry are tough. Is finding an executive for a hospital a hard sell? Is Boston any different from other cities?*

A: It's not as hard as you might think. Times have been hard in the health care industry for so long that CEO candidates expect different challenges, and the good ones are stimulated by them. It's not a new story in health care. People who are afraid of tough times have already left the industry.

Boston is somewhat different, in good and bad ways. Some of the general dynamics apply, but on the positive side, Boston remains a highly attractive place to live in terms of the general environment, culture, overall personal lifestyle, etc. In the world of teaching hospitals in particular, having four highly regarded medical schools and affiliated academic medical centers makes a hospital CEO position highly attractive to many executives. On the negative side, Boston is correctly seen as overly expensive, although this is less of an issue for a highly paid executive. It is also seen as somewhat less entrepreneurial or more risk-averse than other parts of the country, and some folks are not interested for that reason.

Q: *What do you look for in a candidate?*

A: The short answer is, a lot. I evaluate credentials and training, experience and track record, specific skills and personal character, and all of these are driven by the needs of the client organization, currently and looking forward. I want a candidate to love questions just as much as the answers. The best solutions, from what I've seen, flow from the most creatively and thoughtfully constructed questions. I look for boundless curiosity and enthusiasm. That's a generic quality that goes well beyond health care that I think a lot of people would want in an executive. Another key factor is timing: Is this the right person at the right time for the particular client organization? And, putting it the reverse way, is this the right job for the candidate at this point in their career? The answer to both must be "yes."

Q: *What do you say to a potential recruit for a position at a hospital that is losing money?*

A: I basically try to pull no punches and put all the information out there and essentially say this a very tough job and you must not only have the requisite skills and track record, you must have energy. This personal energy is strongly enhanced by leading a troubled hospital from the red to the black without allowing the diminution of quality or service. It's a pretty simple answer, yet the response I get from a candidate speaks volumes to that question.

A: **Q:** *What does it take to turn a hospital around these days?*

It takes varied measures of luck, good fortune and timing and all of that, but that's not something anyone can control, so what I focus on the most is what the leader can do. It takes a leader, in my view, who is fed by the work, not drained by it. It's hard work. Just as importantly, you have to get someone who can engender that same feeling and response in other people. It takes tremendous leadership skills and an ability to connect intimately with different constituents: the board, physicians, staff and the broader community. It takes the ability to be a pragmatic visionary, someone who can attend to the immediacy of a cash-flow crisis, for example, as well as the notion of an improved future at whatever point down the road. There must be incessant communication both internally and externally. It takes the ability to unlock and rediscover a valuable competitive advantage that will bring in business, that will bring in patients as well as physicians in greater numbers. That's a tall order.



BULLET POINTS *on Mead-Fox*

- Has been CEO and COO of a number of startups before becoming a recruiter
- Also recruits officials for colleges and universities, such as Harvard Medical School and Children's Hospital.
- When recruiting an executive, he asks, "Is this the right person at the right time for the particular client organization? And, putting it the reverse way, is this the right job for the candidate at this point in their career? The answer to both must be 'yes.'"