



How to overcome the barriers facing public to private sector transitions

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Despite a generally healthy pool for healthcare talent, the success of NHS managers making the transition to the private sector is concerning. A change in philosophy, says Rob McCargow, is needed to do something about this success rate.

Since the 2010 general election, the marketplace for healthcare talent has arguably seen its greatest revolution in generations. Increasingly, the private sector is being viewed as the only potential growth market for executives seeking new challenges and career security.

From my own experiences, I've seen only around 20 per cent of NHS senior managers successfully manage to win over sceptical private sector employers in selection processes. I believe that this success rate needs to change.

What are the barriers to entry?

There is undoubtedly an alarming degree of prejudice levelled at NHS senior managers before they are even offered an opportunity to present themselves in person. On a daily basis I encounter hiring clients remarking upon this candidate group possessing a perceived dearth of commercial credibility, an allergy towards hard graft, an unfamiliarity with robust performance management, and a lack of agility and flexibility.

This debate tends to address a linear view about what skills and experience are transferable which sometimes misses the point. There is a view that those who work in the public sector do not have personal experience of the sense of danger and potential self-destruction (and personal loss of equity) that you have by working in the private sector.

The traditional counter-argument from NHS senior managers is that they operate in highly complex environments, where the vagaries of politics are simultaneously influential and inconsistent. I tend to agree but this isn't enough to convince the employers that they can make the shift to the private sector.

So what can be done to overcome these barriers?

Selection processes quite regularly commence with CV assessment; therefore, this would be a sensible place to start. The CV presentation of NHS senior managers is one of my personal bug-bears and something that is easily remedied.

I tend to find documents are too long, too densely-loaded with text and technical jargon, too focused upon accountabilities, and simply too dry. They often require a much sharper focus on demonstrating tangible outcomes in order to differentiate themselves in a market which is markedly supply rich and demand poor. Individuals are often in charge of enormous budgets but regularly fail to quantitatively illustrate their personal interventions in driving a return on investment.

Private sector employers are less likely to deploy a rigid panel assessment process in interview and, therefore, individuals need to be prepared for every eventuality in face-to-face interviews. It might sound clichéd but it really is vital to quickly get to the essence of how one can add value in line with the corporate and strategic objectives of the organisation.

A further criticism levelled at NHS senior managers is that they are regularly in positions to network within their usual channels but their efforts are not as assertively targeted as counterparts in the private sector. The

talent resourcing market has transformed beyond recognition in recent years with the onset of social marketing (in particular Linked In), an increasingly transactional recruitment agency market, and an upturn in direct hire from management consultancies.

In my view, private sector perceptions also need to change, and recruitment professionals – or at least the ones who operate at senior level – need to lead the drive to convince private sector clients that the skills of NHS managers are not only transferable, but also potentially of great benefit, particularly where there are distinct pockets of best practice from the healthcare environment.

For example, in certain functional specialisms such as project and programme management, I strongly believe certain NHS methods and practises are market leading. In fact, NHS senior managers have some of the most impressive backgrounds in the country when it comes to variety and scale of challenge. However, much of the onus is really on the individuals making the transition to the public sector to get themselves “fit for purpose” and ready to convince private sector employers that they will be able to make an impact.

In many ways it’s a change in philosophy that NHS managers need to make: a deliberate move toward more evidence-based presentation of their skills, honing in on metrics, and achievement of increased return on investment. That shift, backed by a more commercial and network driven approach to finding and pursuing opportunities, will go a long way towards improving the rate of successful transitions to the private sector.