

## How to Hire Travel Nurses

*by Claire Brocato, feature writer*

When time is of the essence and decisions need to be made in an instant, finding and recruiting a travel nurse who has all the qualities and criteria you need may seem like a daunting task. However, according to healthcare management experts, there are several key factors that can ease you through the process and greatly increase your chances of finding the most qualified candidates.

The first key step to success, described by most, is to partner with a national travel nursing agency that has a robust infrastructure and demonstrates superior customer service. A reputable staffing agency should be able to create an optimum match between your unit and the travel nurse, while offering flexible, cost-effective solutions that fit your specific staffing requirements. Quality management is a cornerstone of the top staffing agencies. This includes services such as clinical liaison reviews of traveler applications, annual reference checking and the highest standards of compliance. The expertise and tenure of the company's recruiters also increases the chances of finding a well-rounded, quality match for your facility.

Once you've found a solid staffing agency that meets your standards, what can you do to ensure you attract the most qualified candidates to your facility?

### Forecast your staffing needs

You may not always have the luxury of an extended lead time, but the more time you have goes a long way toward ensuring a successful match between your unit and the travel nurse you recruit. Although most large companies are able to meet quick turnaround requests, a longer lead time provides access to a larger network of qualified nurses.

"Staffing managers who can forecast their staffing needs six weeks ahead of time have an advantage over those who give us a two-week lead time," said Susan Anderson, regional director of Client Services at AMN Healthcare.

"I most often use travel nurses when our staff nurses take maternity leave," said Denise Bentz, RN, BSN, manager of staffing resources at Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downer's Grove, Illinois. "Fortunately, this allows me to forecast my staffing needs well ahead of time and it gives me the opportunity to find the travel nurses who can provide the right kind of patient care."

Kristin Logan, hospital account manager at AMN Healthcare said, "Some facilities place an order as early as three to six months in advance. This allows us to advertise the order among a large number of RNs who match the requirements of an open position. The closer an order is posted to the start date, the higher the risk that qualified candidates will have already extended their assignments or accepted another assignment."

Orchid Stewart, RN, BSN, traveler manager for the University of Michigan Health System, understands that planning ahead benefits her staffing model and fulfills her patients' needs.

"I have some additional beds opening in three months and will need three or four travelers for this purpose," she said. "I have already placed orders with the staffing agencies we use so I can find the best nurses for these new beds."

In some situations, where a staffing manager already uses the services of travel nurses, upcoming vacancies can be filled by extending the assignments of current travelers. Beverly Jordan, RN, BS, chief nursing officer at Baptist Memorial Health Care in Memphis, Tennessee, who utilizes travelers as an important component of her overall staffing program, has found this to be a highly effective way of filling open positions.

"By maintaining ongoing communication with our travelers and by treating them as part of our own family at Baptist Memorial, we have a very fluid process when it comes to filling vacancies," said Jordan. "The flexibility and willingness of the travelers to continue working here, combined with our ongoing staffing needs has created a situation where our current travelers are often able to fill our upcoming positions."

### **Provide details for the best match**

When you place an order with a healthcare staffing agency, be specific about what you are looking for. The more information you provide, the better the chance of finding an ideal match,” said Anderson.

Besides details about the type of unit, specialty and shift, Anderson recommended that managers be specific about the skills and experience they require in their staff. For example, is there any special equipment the nurse should be knowledgeable about? Does your facility need a nurse with one year’s experience or five? Are you looking for a nurse with multiple specialties who can float to other floors or units? By providing a clear and detailed picture of requirements, the staffing agency will be able to provide only those traveler profiles that match your exact job specifications.

### **Screen profiles, schedule interviews**

Once the travel nurse profiles are received from the healthcare staffing agency, try to review them immediately and schedule a phone interview as soon as possible. In most cases, the agency’s hospital account manager will send you (via e-mail or fax) between five and 10 traveler profiles per open position. This number can be scaled up or down, depending upon your needs. In most cases, a traveler’s profile will include his/her application form, including an employment history, skills checklist and a list of references.

“Travelers’ availability can change quickly, so it’s important to let the candidate or your account manager know your level of interest as soon as possible,” said Anderson. “Even if you can’t interview the candidate right away, call the traveler to let him or her know you’re interested or have your account manager contact the traveler. Like any job seeker, a traveler will often accept the first position they’re offered, so express your interest sooner rather than later. Similarly, if you want a traveler to start immediately, let the candidate and account manager know right away so the requirements and paperwork can be completed in time.”

Jordan agreed with this practice. “Out of respect for the candidates, we schedule an interview within 24 hours of receiving their profiles. We realize that the traveler is as anxious as we are to know the outcome of the hiring situation,” she said.

### **Be prepared to save time**

Telephone interviews are an effective way of identifying candidates who possess the skills and qualities you seek. The important thing to remember is that the interview is a two-way street. While you are evaluating the travel nurse’s ability to meet your requirements, the candidate is simultaneously assessing how well your facility measures up to his or her expectations.

Keep the candidate interested by answering all their questions in as much detail as possible and take your time explaining the advantages of working at your facility.

To prepare for the interview, write down the questions you want to ask before making the call. Also, prepare answers to questions you may be asked by the candidate and keep the candidate’s file at hand during the interview.

### **Questions that travelers want answered**

According to the AMN recruitment department, the questions that travel nurses most want answered include the following:

- What is the nurse-patient ratio at your facility?
- What type of patients do you most often treat?
- What is your float policy?
- How are the hours scheduled for this shift?
- What are the responsibilities of this position?
- Why are you hiring a traveler?
- How are travelers treated at your facility?
- What type of orientation do you offer travelers?

## Questions and answers

Be straightforward in your questions about the candidate's clinical expertise and experience so the candidate clearly understands the demands of the unit.

"Use their paperwork and skills checklist as a guide for your questions. Be direct in your questions—if you want them to clarify a specific skill or experience, ask for additional details," advised Anderson. "Provide details about the shift, the work schedule, on-call time and your floating policies to avoid misunderstandings later on."

Logan advises that you ask open-ended questions that require more than a one- or two-word answer. "For instance, by asking a travel nurse to describe his or her last assignment, you will get a much better idea of the type of patient care the nurse has provided than if you simply ask them what unit they worked on or what procedures they did."

Aside from analyzing the candidate's credentials and experience, the interview also allows you to get a sense for the candidate's personality.

"I typically ask a traveler to tell me about themselves," said Bentz. "This helps me to get a handle on their personality, their confidence level and communication abilities. Of course, I ask a lot of questions related to their competency level and experience, but I also want to pinpoint the nurses who are likely to have a good rapport with our patient population and have the potential to work seamlessly with our staff."

## The right stuff

Joanie Rother, RN, a senior recruiter at AMN Healthcare who has been with the company for almost eight years, knows what qualities make a good travel nurse.

"Try to identify a nurse who is a quick learner and adapts to new situations easily. Look for a positive, enthusiastic attitude and someone who has a team player mentality," Rother said.

Stewart suggested: "Besides strong clinical skills, I look for flexibility and good interpersonal skills. Travelers need to be able to communicate effectively, find their feet quickly and be flexible with their schedule."

Jordan said that often it's more than just skill that makes a good nurse.

"A passion for excellence, a caring and compassionate nature, a team player attitude and the ability to anticipate the needs of patients as well as staff members are the qualities that we try to look for," she said.

## Sell your strong points

It's important to remember that most travel nurses will have more than one option when it comes to selecting their next assignment. Bearing this in mind, you will want to create a favorable impression of your facility and community during your interview. Ask candidates about their interests and try to match their interests with amenities and attractions in your area.

"We stress the fact that Baptist Memorial scored a 98 percent JCAHO rating, the highest for a facility of its size in the country," said Jordan. "We make mention of our state-of-the-art equipment, our recent \$200 million renovation and very importantly, we let our candidates know how committed we are to our nurses and how well we treat travel nurses. They are part of our team and we include them in everything we do."

Stewart added, "Some nurses are very eager to work in a teaching facility like ours, so we always let them know about the experience they can gain here, and the opportunity they will have to see cases that they've probably never seen before."

Given the demands and challenges of today's healthcare environment, implementing each of these hiring suggestions may not always be possible. However, if given the opportunity, these tactics can help ensure a successful and mutually beneficial traveler assignment.

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**Ready to hire a travel nurse? AMN can help. Call (866) 871-8519.**