

THE NEW BRIEF



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What do healthcare agencies really want when it comes to potential employees? The answer to that question is in a constant state of flux, as technologies, clients' changing demands and the ever-expanding skill sets of a new generation of job seekers are transforming the rules of recruitment and hiring. **Larry Dobrow** reports

Years ago, healthcare agencies would respond to vacancies in their ranks by following a process scripted decades earlier. They'd pore through stacks of resumes, interview those candidates whose qualifications popped off the page and hire the individual who was the "best fit," as affirmed by some or another staffer's gut feeling. Rarely would they stray beyond the rigid roles and skills that had traditionally been the industry's bread-and-butter.

Contrast this with the process Intouch Solutions went through before hiring a non-C-level employee last month. Before the agency started asking existing staffers for referrals or plumbing the depths of LinkedIn, it conducted group interviews with internal stakeholders to define the professional and social traits needed in the role. It then wrote a brief that tried to paint a full portrait of the ideal candidate. Only then did Intouch consider names and CVs—and only then did the agency truly understand the daunting nature of the assignment.

"Nowadays, there are just so many attributes you can go after. Is the person a digital powerhouse? Does the person know pharma? Can that person craft a story from start to finish?," says Intouch executive vice president Angela Tenuta. "Since we started to do the briefs last year, we realized that sometimes we'd been making [hiring] decisions based on likability, rather than the specific skills we needed. The skills have changed; the way we go about finding people had to change."

Welcome to agency hiring circa-late-2014. With the caveat that recruiting the best people has always been one of the industry's toughest tasks, agency execs say that the challenge is more daunting now than at any time in the recent past.

Much of it has to do with the maturation of digital skills within the agency ecosystem. Once highly coveted—Tenuta recalls an instance at the dawn of the iPad era, in which an iOS-fluent individual made his hiring contingent on "getting ownership shares"—those skills are now almost commonplace. If you don't do digital, either you're out of the business or on your way out, whether or not you realize it.

"We had an interview a few weeks ago with a talented creative person," recalls CDM New York president Kyle Barich. "But when we asked to see the work, the work was a book, literally, without anything that was digital. If you haven't nailed the part of the story where you keep up with the times, it's rough out there."

Which isn't to suggest that it's a buyers' market for agencies in hiring mode. Havas Health chief digital officer, partner, Larry Mickelberg likens recruiting in the current job climate to "a sifting and triage job—and there's no gold at the bottom of the pan."

Plus, there's more disagreement than ever before as to what constitutes an ideal agency employee. Is it the Millennial who expects

creative satisfaction every waking moment? Is it the veteran who has taken classes and pushed to work on digital initiatives in order to stay current? When it comes to agency hiring, "best" and "smartest" may have radically different meanings from company to company.

"Let's get the very best people' is kind of a moving target," says IOMEDIA managing director Marc Porter. "Given the pace of change, the best person, at least for us, is the one who has a kind of crystal ball in his head, the one who can fill client needs before the client realizes there's a need." He pauses, then adds, "You can't really put that in a job listing."

And therein lies the real problem: So much of what clients want and need nowadays can't be neatly encapsulated in a few sentences. "On some level, everybody here needs to be a strategist," Porter reports. "We want our PhDs to have communication skill sets," adds Amar Urhekar, president, McCann Health Americas.



At Havas Health (above), recruitment is "a sifting and triage job," according to chief digital officer, partner, Larry Mickelberg.

Thus it should come as no surprise that agencies are searching high and low for these kinds of hybrid employees—multiskilled people for a multichannel world. Here, then, is a sampling of the new breed of employees most coveted by agencies big and small.

The Data/Analytics Demystifier

The data and analytics revolution swept through the agency world a few hiring cycles ago. As a result, just about every firm has some basic facility with data. In fact, many companies have reached the

Anthropologist, researcher, improv comic: Meet the New Breed

Maybe it's reductive to bunch Daryl Somma, Shwen Gwee and Nathan Stewart under a single heading. Beyond being exceedingly good at their jobs, the three have only a single thing in common—namely, that in terms of professional background, they have nothing in common, with each other or the great majority of their agency peers. Yet that's what makes them comrades of a kind and flag-bearers for the New Breed, for the type of employee whose unusual mix of ability, acumen and personality is prompting agency HR folks to rethink what they look for in a job candidate.



Asked how she made her way to CDM New York, where she's a VP, senior account planner, Somma responds, "Sheer chance." After completing an undergraduate degree in anthropology and a Master's in international public health, Somma moved to Basel, where she spent half a decade at the renowned Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute.

There, she worked alongside another anthropologist, conducting cultural and sociological research on the factors that contributed to people in poor countries seeking out healthcare.

Upon returning to the US, Somma's job search led her to an interview for an agency copywriter gig. "The woman in that interview said, 'You might be able to write just fine, but you're not a copywriter. You're a planner,'" Somma recalls. "She walked me next door to a colleague, and the rest is history."

The job proved a perfect fit. "Planners are the social scientists of agencies. The best planning departments have people who come at it from different directions," Somma explains. To that end, Somma has focused on creating ethnographies for the physicians and patient populations CDM New York clients hope to reach. "Happily, everybody here seems to find what I do—incorporating that anthropological thinking—interesting and sexy."

As for moving from academia to agency, Somma admits the transition was a challenge. "Seven years hence, I still think about it," she says. "Learning to communicate to non-academics was tough. You have to simplify complex ideas in a way that's pithy and interesting, and that doesn't come automatically to someone who's been doing things one way for a long time."



Gwee's title at Digitas Health—VP, group director of social strategy—similarly obscures his unusual-for-healthcare background. Gwee, in fact, describes his current role as "my third iteration in life." While he'd charted a course to be an academic researcher, he realized during grad school that he "liked doing stuff on the Internet," he says with a laugh. Always interested in science, his first job was for

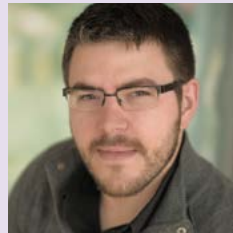
a company that specialized in psychopharmacology, where he was charged with digitizing the firm's CME efforts.

Gwee's digital facility—and, just as importantly, his ability to articulate his knowledge and enthusiasm to audiences unfamiliar with the brave new online world—led him to Vertex Pharmaceuticals at the dawn of the digital/social age. A big part of his job, ultimately, involved educating the in-house legal and regulatory staff. "The majority of the people who were reviewing things I was bringing through had never used the platforms. One of the things

I did at a legal/regulatory meeting was give a 'this is how Twitter works' presentation." So how was his chat received? "I didn't hear, 'Wait—that's a re-what?' as much as I did before it."

Frustrations persist, of course. Then, it was that some of his peers believed that social media was a fad, which revealed itself in the minuscule budgets afforded such programs. Now, while those budgets are far more robust, Gwee still encounters some client pushback, less about the utility of what he's proposing than about the intramural mechanics. "It's so much better than it was, but there's still some 'okay, where should this sit in the company? Is it in corporate? marketing? communications?,'" he says.

Four months into his tenure at Digitas, Gwee is attempting to populate his social-media group with like-minded individuals, regardless of background. "What we want are people who have some experience with pharma or healthcare, but can look outside that box and then adapt their big, broad thinking to the pharma guidelines."



Stewart's mission at Intouch Solutions, where he serves as manager, search marketing, may be less comprehensive. His success in the role, however, is twin testament to his employer's flexibility and his own force of personality. After arriving at the University of Missouri with little direction ("I was undeclared, undetermined, un-something"), Stewart

found himself equally entranced by his classes in marketing and Japanese. He completed an undergrad degree in international business and an MBA, but decided he "didn't want to work for any company hiring MBAs."

"My mom said, 'Have you thought about advertising?,' which I hadn't," Stewart recalls. Weeks later, he scored an internship with a local agency and, soon, found himself charged with what he calls "the analytics stuff. They had no idea what to do with it, so it was like, okay, give it to the intern."

He initially arrived at Intouch as a contractor, but was brought on full-time after the agency saw him in action. To hear Stewart tell it, Intouch execs "had no idea what they were getting into" when they took him up on his offer to flee the traditional back-office habitat of a SEO guru and interact with a client. "In the meeting, I said something like, 'We're going to optimize the bejeezus out of your web site.' That's completely ridiculous, but the client liked it."

One lesson to be learned from Stewart's success: Don't stereotype. While Stewart is as entranced with SEO marketing as the next SEO guy or gal, that doesn't mean he wants to be relegated to the least trafficked corner of the office. In fact, he's been performing with an improv comedy troupe for nearly two decades, which renders him quicker on his feet than the average salesperson.

"People laugh when I tell them this, but the way I credit any success I've had is 30% to education and earlier jobs, 70% to doing improv," he says. "It's about listening and responding and being in the moment, but it's also incredibly collaborative."

Stewart believes the next generation of SEO wonks will have a lot more in common background-wise with him than with his predecessors. "The students I meet who are doing search and analytics now, they aren't the stereotypical geeks in a cave," he continues. "They love knowing that there's a path like this available to them. Communicating 'hey, wherever your passions go, we're gonna be there to support you'—that's the way to get the most out of them."

“okay, now what?” phase of their evolution into data wonks.

The answer to that question is “go make sense of it all.” Tenuta says that the best data/analytics pros are the ones who don’t merely break down the numbers with aplomb, but also weave takeaways from those numbers into a larger and more easily digestible narrative. “Lots of people can pull data,” she explains. “What we all want are the people who can bring the story through the data.”

Porter agrees. “Number-crunchers per se can only do so much. They have to want to be heard. Nobody wants the person who’s like, ‘I write code and pull data, but whatever’s done with it isn’t my problem.’”

The Chief Behavioral Officer

Like with data/analytics experts, you won’t find too many companies that haven’t added behavioral strategy to their professional toolkit. Nonetheless, even those agencies who have had an in-house behavioral function for some time appear to have doubled-down on its importance. “What you’re seeing now is behavioralists being brought into the mainstream,” Mickelberg says. “They sit alongside the planners, strategists and creatives.”

The role of behavioralists has evolved just like that of data/analytics wonks: It’s not enough to do the job the way it was defined even two years ago. “What [behavioral scientists] do is make sure everyone understands that you need the ‘why?’ before the ‘how?’ and the ‘what?.’ If you know the ‘why,’ you can do the rest,” Porter says.

The UX Guru

More than any of these other new breed employees, UX gurus are hard to come by. As a result, vigilant agencies are redoubling their efforts to prevent poaching. That said, “user experience” has been an online-marketing buzzphrase for so long that it’s baffling how few agencies have embraced UX specialists. The ones who employ them, however, can’t say enough about their utility.

“We think they’re the new-age creatives,” Urhekar says. “The UX director is the person who’s helping us shape our vision and visualize it in the digital world. You can have the best data, the best creative idea, the best strategy—but if you’re not able to create a positive user experience, it’s all going to fall flat.”

Barich agrees. “[User experience] went from not important at all to super-important very quickly. We rely on them heavily.”

The Content Overlord

Content strategists don’t get the same degree of love, perhaps because their job is defined differently from one company to the next. Some view the content strategist as merely the digital-era equivalent of a copywriter. Others envision the content strategist as a jack of all trades, someone who can move easily from one internal group to the next. “Is it its own department? Some of our content strategists are with the UX team and some are with the SEO team,” Tenuta says.

According to Shazzia Khan, chief talent officer, Havas Health, it’s the type of role that sometimes forces higher-ups and HR execs alike to play “casting director. You hand-pick the people to solve the client’s particular challenge.” At the same time, she stresses that nobody should understate the value of an agile content strategist. “They write copy in context. They write it to be syndicated around a bunch of different digital platforms: a site, a phone, a future smart watch. It’s sort of an evolution of the old copywriter role, but it requires a broader outlook. It’s not easy.”

The Project Maestro

Over the last few years, it has dawned on agencies that managing a multichannel project is a far different experience than, say, spearheading the creation of a visual aid for use by sales reps. As a result, agencies now covet those individuals who have the mix of abilities required to oversee a modern-era initiative.

They must be able to talk strategy. They must be able to communicate equally well with client-side agitators and in-house developers. They must be able to hit various deadlines across various channels while simultaneously remaining cognizant of budgetary and regulatory restrictions. This is not a job for the meek, the crisis-averse or anyone with less than ninja-grade organizational skills.

“Project managers are not just the quote-unquote paper pushers anymore,” notes Urhekar. “They’ve got to be able to have meaningful conversations with different stakeholders. They have to do the heavy lifting from a coordination standpoint. They have to be able to build confidence internally and externally as to what that final product will look like.”

Barich adds that the shift from AOR assignments towards project-by-project work has accelerated the rise in importance of able project



At Intouch Solutions (above), EVP Angela Tenuta says that “the way we go about finding people had to change”

managers. “In this more chopped-up, project-by-project business, you need a more exquisite way of managing time, resources, people, everything. It’s a different skill set.”

The Future

As for future agency areas of need, execs and HR people appear to be monitoring the data that devices, like the Apple Watch, will collect in ever-greater volumes. “Healthcare will evolve to be focused around biometric data. But to me, it’s always going to go back to how we utilize the information at hand,” Porter says.

It’s likely, then, that agencies won’t entirely ditch the hire-as-many-smart-people-as-conceivably-possible approach, even as they seek out elusive new breed staffers. “The pace of change makes predictions almost pointless,” Barich says. “Ultimately, it’s about what I’d call learning agility. Give me someone who can learn lessons from experience and apply those learnings in new situations. Those are the people who are always going to be the most successful, no matter what we’re calling them.” ■