

# FIRM FOUNDATIONS

Recruiting and retaining talent have always been concerns for healthcare agencies—and as the pace of industry has quickened, the challenge has intensified. **James Chase** assesses the opportunities and pain points—the methods and the madness—of agency careers



ILLUSTRATION: A. E. KIEREN

When *MM&M* asked agencies earlier this year to rank their biggest challenges, 61 of the 92 responding firms cited “talent acquisition/retention.” A further 46 noted “managing growth” (arguably talent-related), while 37 mentioned “keeping ahead of technology” (definitely talent-related). Sense an ongoing theme here?

“Recruiting good talent is always hard because our industry is so competitive and specialized,” says Lynn Macrone, managing partner, chief creative-strategic officer, JUICE Pharma Worldwide.

However, the pace of digital innovation and the increasingly specialized nature of medicine—not to mention the mini-boom of approvals currently buoying the industry—have combined to magnify the size of the task. “It’s definitely a challenging market because, primarily, what we call the ‘hot skill sets’ are changing,” says Nancy Logue, VP, human resources, CMI/Compas. “So it’s tougher to find folks because there’s a limited talent pool of people with those skills.”

Logue observes that candidates also place high value on career development today. They often prize it even more than job security. “It’s a different mind-set about how people approach work,” she continues. “It’s huge. They’re looking for that growth, that development, that career path. We have to address it up front with them.”

So after years of stocking up on digitally savvy talent, might the focus be shifting back toward candidates with more traditional industry expertise? That doesn’t seem to be the case.

Agencies would love to hire candidates who are well versed in both pharma and digital but they simply don’t exist—at least not in high-enough numbers. Although the healthcare landscape is evolving briskly, it is still being outpaced by digital innovation. Thus the pressure to keep up with technology is forcing the hand of recruiters.

“The analytical and technical skills that support digital are the hot skills,” Logue says. “But these skills keep changing rapidly.” So recruitment teams must constantly reevaluate requisite job skills.

Macrone, too, believes that technological skills are crucial. “You need people that are digitally savvy,” she says. “When it comes to analytics and digital, if they’re also pharma-savvy, that’s great. But if they’re not, that’s okay. And when you get into content and creative, if they’re not pharma-savvy but they have an interest and a desire, it can be learned.”

Logue agrees that pharma can be taught. “We realized a few years ago we would have to go outside our industry for some of the talent that we need,” she says, “so we’ve developed several programs in-house, with mentors, to bring people up to speed.”

Ritesh Patel, chief digital officer, Ogilvy CommonHealth Worldwide, paints a similar picture. “It’s very difficult to find people that are digitally savvy and understand the marketplace, the regulatory issues and all the things you need to do from a promotional marketing and advertising perspective,” he says. “It’s more important to have digital [skills]. I can teach pharma. I mean, I was in commercial real estate and a month later I was doing DRIVE4COPD (see sidebar, p. 46).”

In fact, Macrone is enthused when non-pharma folks come on board. “It helps to bring some different perspective to our business,” she says, noting that JUICE has had particular success hiring people with engineering and consumer backgrounds.

## MORE THAN DIGITAL

It’s not just about digital and pharma, either. “We want people with leadership qualities who are great collaborators, who have a vision for what they want to do, who are curious, who can get the best out of the people they are working with,” says Macrone.

## LEARNING TO FLY

Janelle Starr, partner and general manager, Heartbeat West



When Janelle Starr was just starting out in the business, she watched coworkers going to client meetings, wondering if maybe one day she’d be important enough to be asked to get on a plane. “And now I’m thinking: Can I not fly on a plane anymore? Can I not fly to meetings?” she chuckles.

Starr cut her teeth in 1999 at Detroit digital agency Sigma 6 and says its somewhat-cavalier approach set the tone for her development. “It was a little bit of a wild west. It was a case of, ‘Can you figure this out?’ and then you got the opportunity to figure it out,” she recalls. “I loved that and I think it’s been a driver in my career over the years.”

Set on moving to New York, she eventually found a home at Heartbeat, initially as senior project manager and later rising to become VP of production, overseeing project management and technology. Starr was then charged with building an internal marketing practice. “The thing that is awesome about Heartbeat is they were like, ‘Okay, let’s figure out something new,’” she says.

That’s when Starr began working with CEO Bill Drummy on an everyday basis. “It became natural, getting groomed by the CEO and learning what you need to care about, what matters day to day and where you need to focus,” she says.

Having earlier expressed an interest in being involved in any possible plans for California expansion, Starr was eventually given the chance to build a new LA office. The task seemed daunting, she says, but as with every other challenge Drummy had thrown her way, he showed complete faith in her ability to succeed. “He’s always been like, ‘I know you can figure it out. Now go and do it.’” Heartbeat West opened in January 2012 and has been growing steadily ever since.

Starr quickly discovered that running an office is a “different beast” than running a department. Although she wanted to infuse some New York savvy into the culture, she also learned the importance of being open to different ways of thinking. “I wanted to make sure that it wasn’t just about my ideas,” she says.

Starr believes a crucial ingredient for a successful career is finding a company that offers opportunities. “That’s why I stayed for 11 years,” she says. “I mean, who stays for 11 years?” She adds that it’s important to trust yourself and to say, “Somebody has given me this responsibility because they believe I have the ability to do it. Then it’s about having the balls to step up to the plate and make it happen.”

Ben Putman, managing director of JUICE San Francisco (see sidebar, p. 46), is less compromising of non-pharma candidates but acknowledges that digital skills are the most crucial. “They have to understand modern communication and actually live it,” he says. “So when I say, ‘Let’s use WordPress because it’s quicker,’ they understand that. There’s a good pool of people here who have both sides.”

Conversely, Janelle Starr, partner, general manager, Heartbeat West (see sidebar, above), looks for industry expertise first and foremost. “We tend to get people coming to us with a digital background, so it’s definitely more about having healthcare experience,” she says.

Logue stresses the importance of finding candidates with the right fit. “Those are the ones that are going to want to stay for the long haul, that we can address with development programs and that can



## A CRAZY RIDE

Ritesh Patel, chief digital officer, Ogilvy CommonHealth Worldwide

The details of how Ritesh Patel came to head up the digital capabilities of Ogilvy CommonHealth Worldwide could probably fill a book. Here, an abridged version:

Patel started out in the hotel business in Knightsbridge, London. He then moved to the US to become a travel agent. A few years later he left to start a business building databases for hotels. Eventually the business failed and he moved back to England and became a newspaper typesetter.

He then joined Forte Hotels and spent a few years developing databases and systems for sales, marketing, loyalty and reservations. Ousted in the wake of a hostile takeover at the start of the dot-com boom, Patel was then hired by Conduit to open a New York office. There he wound up contributing to the digital strategy for Chase's online banking debut.

In 1998 he joined Agency.com as head of technology for the New York office—but having gone public in 2000, the agency fell victim to the dot-com bust a year later. Patel then headed to Havas as its global CIO but only lasted for a year before “the French moved all



the IT back to Paris.” Then he joined real estate giant Cushman & Wakefield, where he built a single global CRM/sales force system for 2,300 brokers across the world.

Patel finally got his first taste of healthcare marketing in 2009 when an “old friend” at Chandler Chicco persuaded him to become the firm's head of digital.

The first campaign he touched was the DRIVE4COPD effort. “I made the whole thing up,” Patel admits. “I had no idea whether we could or couldn't do it or what the rules were. I just said, ‘Sure, we can put up a YouTube channel and a Facebook page and a Twitter handle,’ and it was successful.”

Patel may have winged it at first, but he earned a reputation as a digital healthcare guru. After a promotion to global head of digital for Chandler Chicco's parent inVentiv, he arrived at Ogilvy in 2014. “There are a lot of hard-and-fast rules around digital and social. We are figuring it out and making sure it works,” he says. “Technology has a profound impact in changing and transforming businesses. I've seen that throughout my career.”

## A PLOT TWIST

Ben Putman, general manager, JUICE San Francisco

Ben Putman's career path has been unorthodox. Armed with an engineering degree and a body of research in handwriting recognition, he helped develop a technology that we now take for granted: the ability to deposit checks via a smartphone. From there he went on to manage teams that created enterprise-level finance software, then joined a start-up for social communities as chief technology officer.

“We could be anywhere in the world,” he says. “I worked off an island in Brazil and then lived in Buenos Aires for a while. I could basically run everything from a BlackBerry on the beach. It was pretty cool.”

But after the work became too intense for him to enjoy the lifestyle, Putman moved to New York. There, on the recommendation of a friend, he joined Harrison and Star's digital operation and got his first taste of healthcare advertising. “I had a lot of fun,” he recalls. A few years later he joined FCB Health and wound up running the digital group: “I would regularly have 100 projects on the go at a time.” He found that to be “a lot of fun” as well.

Eventually Putman found his way to JUICE, after the company came up with a new role for harnessing his unique skills. “I'd had a reputa-



tion for innovation, for always pushing the envelope,” he says. “So they created a position for me based on pure innovation.” He would work across all teams, bringing ideas from the rest of the world. “I was making sure that we were at the forefront so that our clients could benefit before anyone else did.”

Putman's recent move to general manager of JUICE's San Francisco office might seem a little perplexing at first. The idea is to infuse his technology-driven vision into every area of the business in order to better serve the types of high-tech, high-science clients located on the West Coast. And with his experience of leading teams and, more recently, working with the new business at JUICE, he is an obvious choice.

Putman is committed to shaping a new era of healthcare communications and speaks of the “great opportunity—and responsibility—of companies to help improve health and to be transparent and be authentic” via digital channels. “Technology changes people and cultures,” he says. “The fact that someone like me can be a general manager of an office is a testament to how much things have changed.”

grow and learn within our company,” she says. But when it comes to sourcing talent, Logue points out that employee referrals often reap the most success. “Far and away, our people are our best recruiters,” she continues. “That speaks for our retention rates because employees will only refer their friends to an organization if they themselves are satisfied.”

Starr notes that being part of a large network can also help. “Publicis wants to retain all of its top talent, so if somebody in an agency wants a new experience, the goal is to transfer them within the network.”

## TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

To help determine candidates' suitability for a particular role, Logue deploys a behavioral assessment tool called Predictive Index, which can accurately identify individuals' styles, attitudes, motivators and learning techniques. “It helps us to understand the whole person and how he or she would fit into an organization, a department or a position,” she says.

The test comprises two questions for which candidates are asked to check off words from a list and takes just 10 minutes to complete. As well as a recruiting tool, CMI/Compas also uses PI to build teams internally. “People love it because they learn so much about one another and can adapt their style to be more effective,” says Logue. (Having taken the PI test for this article, the author can report that the results are accurate and detailed.)

JUICE, like many other agencies, takes the onboarding process seriously. New recruits are methodically exposed to the environment, people, culture and expectations. Macrone says the agency conducts workshops on topics like presentation training and leadership training.

“We have pretty outstanding retention,” says Macrone. “If people find after a while they want to do something else, we welcome that and we listen. It's important to always have opportunities.”

Logue notes CMI/Compas has similarly invested heavily in training and development via “intensive onboarding programs” that establish relationships within the organization at all levels and customized development plans for every employee. “It pays off, both in employee satisfaction and client satisfaction,” she says. “Our retention rate has been great.” ■