

Executive Search Case Study - Birmingham Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

Birmingham Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust needed to fill both a Chief Operating Officer and newly created Deputy Chief Operating Officer role around the same time in 2012. They decided to recruit for both posts together and chose the NHS Leadership Academy Executive Search Service to help them.

"We needed the individuals recruited to work as a pair with different, but complementary skills," said CEO Sarah-Jane Marsh. "One post needed to be highly operational, and involved running the hospital, whereas the other was more transformational, with a focus on change. It made sense to look for them as a pair."

As it turned out, the hospital made four new appointments through the recruitment process. Tim Attack was appointed as Chief Operating Officer, Claire Burden as Deputy Chief Operating Officer, but other candidates also stood out, so a Director of Planning and Strategy was appointed from the COO shortlist, while a Medical Directorate Associate Service Director was also appointed from the Deputy COO shortlist.

"We appointed four people, who are all really excellent," said Sarah-Jane. "The service provided by the NHS Executive Search Service was highly professional, timely and efficient. There was a genuine understanding of the NHS context, which can sometimes be superficial with private executive search services. All commitments were honoured and I felt well supported and informed throughout."

The fact that the NHS team had connections with the NHS Top Leaders programme and with local NHS Talent Maps was also an important factor in deciding to use them.

"Given the nature of the roles, we knew we wanted to appoint candidates with NHS backgrounds and experience," said Sarah-Jane. "It was very important to find the right people, as there were lots of operational pressures at the time and limited teamwork across ops team members. I was also going on maternity leave at the end of October 2012, so it was time critical, as I wanted people in post before that date. The NHS Executive Search team totally understood all of these considerations and definitely created as strong a field as possible for both jobs."

Although Sarah-Jane said she would pick a search agency with the most appropriate experience for particular posts, she felt the NHS team has an advantage when it comes to posts that are likely to be filled by people with NHS backgrounds.

"It can be more difficult to get a foot in the door as a non-NHS search agency," said Sarah-Jane. "Talent Maps are quite a commodity and the NHS doesn't want to lose its best people, so sometimes the information is protected. Inside knowledge and contacts could give the NHS search service an advantage."

The NHS team provided a very thorough and competitive search, said Sarah Jane, and she would use the service again. She has already recommended it to others, as has HR Director Theresa Nelson. Theresa was also pleased with the service, particularly as the NHS search team was very easy to work with.

"We were very involved with the process and we had a lot of direct interaction with the Executive Search Service team leader," said Theresa. "He understood what we were looking

for and grasped quite quickly the type of organisation and leadership culture we had. That gave me confidence.”

Theresa was impressed that the recruitment process ran smoothly, despite tight timescales.

“Because of the interview process and stakeholder involvement there were a number of stages, with quite short gaps in between,” she said. “The NHS Executive Search team respected our deadlines, which was important, and everything progressed quite quickly. I was very happy with the service they provided.”

Tim Atack, who was appointed to the Chief Operating Officer role in September 2012, was an internal candidate, having previously been Director of Performance and ICT at the hospital. After his initial application and long listing he met for interview with a representative of the NHS Executive Search team and was later shortlisted for the post. He met with the CEO and attended interviews over two days, including carousel interviews with stakeholders, managers and clinicians.

“There was regular and good feedback from the NHS Search Service lead and I thought the overall process went well,” said Tim. “I had feedback after the initial interview with the NHS search service, which I generally agreed with, and it helpfully identified gaps that I was able to cover in the follow up process.

“What was good was that the whole process was transparent. I was put through the same level of rigour as all the candidates, even though I was an internal candidate. The shortlisting and longlisting process was also robust. With a good choice of potential candidates it enabled the leadership team to spot other people with talent who could take on important roles in the organisation. That’s very efficient and good value for money.”