



Managing your career

Peter English provides some timely tips on how to make the move from a PCT to a FT.

► I'm currently delivering workshops on career management, CVs and interviews for NHS finance managers across the country. A question that I'm often asked is 'how easy is it to get a job when you don't have the "right" experience?'

When it comes to making the move from a PCT to an acute trust, it is important to remember that your 'soft' skills and personal qualities often carry more weight than technical knowledge or experience. I recently asked six NHS finance directors what they look for when selecting a new manager. There was general agreement that 'it's people skills

that distinguish one accountant from another', and that enthusiasm and a 'can-do' attitude are often the deciding factor when comparing candidates.

'You're being interviewed every day of your life' – acute trust director of finance

Directors of finance often phone one another to ask 'what do you think of so-and-so?'. If you're serious about making the move from PCT to FT, then it's important to get on the radar of your local DoFs, and that you actively manage your reputation. Your reputation is a combination of your profile (how many senior people know about you?) and your image (what impression have you made on them?)

If you need to raise your profile, the tips from NHS finance directors are that you should:

- volunteer to lead, or be a member of, multi-organisation working parties (eg the local QIPP group)
- attend events offered by ACCA, HFMA and other professional bodies
- pay attention to nurturing relationships. It's especially important to avoid making enemies (eg, don't express frustration with people who work in a different way from you).

'Get yourself noticed at meetings – don't be a passenger' – PCT director of finance and information

Look for ways to establish a reputation as someone who has developed an area of specialist expertise and who is easy to work with. In particular, it's important to be seen as someone who brings energy and enthusiasm to new initiatives.

The written application

There are dozens of applicants for many vacancies. NHS recruiters are expected to read each application carefully and note the ways in which the candidate meets the person specification. You will endear yourself to the recruiter if you make their job easier by structuring your supporting statement so that it explicitly addresses each of the selection criteria.

'Don't make me search for evidence' – foundation trust director of finance

Two things which really irritate the DoFs that I interviewed are candidates who:

- recycle the same NHS Jobs application form for different vacancies

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- cut and paste from their job description when giving information on their current role.

Both these approaches give the message 'I couldn't be bothered to tailor my application for your vacancy. I'm sending out lots of applications without really considering what each role involves.' DoFs like candidates who are clearly building a career and who have thought carefully about their next move. If you have no acute sector experience then you need to convince the shortlister that you're not just applying for their vacancy because your current post is at risk.

Get in touch

A key part of the process is the pre-application informal chat with the post manager. You can use this preliminary conversation to explore their views about the priorities in the job, and to tease out whether your lack of acute sector experience is likely to be a problem.

Note that some recruiters don't like the NHS Jobs application form and will appreciate it if you also email them a copy of your CV when you submit your formal application – but check this out when you meet for the informal chat: occasionally the HR department

will have specified that CVs should not be considered.

Your CV

Too many NHS finance managers undersell themselves on their CVs – often they simply list their employment history, responsibilities and qualifications. A good CV should do three things:

- spell out your qualifications and areas of expertise
- give concrete evidence of your 'soft skills'
- describe your achievements in terms of the impact you have made on your department, service or organisation.

If there are a large number of well qualified, technically competent, candidates it is the latter two points which will determine whether or not you are invited for interview.

Tip: Think about how you describe your current role. Do you want to emphasise the size of your PCT's budget (if you are applying to a large acute trust) or impress the recruiter with the way that you have formed a close supportive relationship with a small group of service managers (if this is something which would be required in the role for which you are applying)?

The interview

Be prepared for questions that focus on your lack of acute trust experience, and aim to emphasise the following points:

- you will add value by virtue of your understanding of different parts of the local health economy, particularly when the trust is negotiating with commissioners
- you have a host of transferable skills which you will start using as soon as you take up the post
- you have done lots of research on the trust, and the issues faced by acute providers generally, and you have thought about how you will manage your first few weeks so you get up to speed quickly. ▲

Peter English is an independent consultant.

Information on his career development, CV and interview skills workshops can be found at www.hfma.org.uk/events-and-conferences/take+control/

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Case study

At the start of 2010 Kirsty Rae worked as a financial accountant for a PCT. By the end of the year she had secured a role as a management accountant for Women's and Children's Services, Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust. Here are Kirsty's tips on how to make the move from a PCT to an acute trust:

- **Be positive, and express your enthusiasm for the job**
'One of the points I made at interview was that my passion would outweigh my lack of experience and technical knowledge – and the panel agreed: it was one of the things that they commented on in my post-interview feedback.'
- **Get friends to help you prepare for the interview**
Kirsty asked some of the PCT's management accountants to talk her through some examples of their work, and this paid off in the interview – even though she couldn't answer all the technical questions, she demonstrated reasonable knowledge of management accounting, and also her willingness to learn fast.
- **Show that you recognise that life in an acute trust might be very different from working in a PCT**
Kirsty had been accustomed to providing financial support to commissioners. She found that the clinicians she was working with in the acute trust were less comfortable with numbers, and were sometimes reluctant to engage with the trust's finance managers. Winning them over was hard work, and showed why the interview panel had placed a premium on her soft skills and her enthusiasm.