

## Stability: a dangerous illusion?

Does the sales force have the right skills to target a changing NHS?  
Or is job stability a danger to employer and employee alike?

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The pharmaceutical market in the UK is changing quickly. By April next year just over 200 Clinical Commissioning Groups will have completed the approval process and will be operational. This will dramatically change the customer landscape for pharmaceutical companies and also demand changes in engagement strategies. This, in turn, will necessitate changes in the behaviours of individuals responsible for that engagement (such as Market Access Managers, Key Account Managers and Sales Representatives).

Pharmaceutical companies are continually restructuring in an attempt to keep pace with the rate of change. However, one of the key problems they face is assessing whether their current workforce has the talents and skills to address these new challenges. It is certainly the case that some companies are finding a lack of flexibility and adaptability within their workforce to support the change process.

### Critical talents

Given the fluidity of the market environment and to be in a position to proactively respond to it, companies must address the critical talents required by the workforce and start to assess for these talents during the recruitment process. These include two particular talents which are of vital importance, but are often currently not assessed for. These are:

- Adaptability (or flexibility/agility)
- Learning mind set.

### Adaptability

Individuals with this talent will respond well to changing demands. They flourish in environments that reward responsiveness and do not require a highly formalised or routine structure with lots of rules and regulations. They also have the ability to



There are many medical representatives who have had a successful career fundamentally doing the same job in the same way and often for the same employer. But stability may be a dangerous illusion for both employer and employee.

recognise current or future anticipated changes and adjust their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours to cope with them.

### Learning mind set (Learner)

People with this talent demonstrate a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve their knowledge and skills set. They will also be more likely to understand the changing nature of the marketplace and the need to learn how to engage with new types of customers.

Many Sales Representatives in the Pharmaceutical Industry are being asked to radically change how they work and to start engaging with customers using key account

management principles. To perform this role effectively, more knowledge of the customer and the marketplace is required. There is also the need to change behaviours and attitudes that may have suited the more traditional role they fulfilled previously. Those representatives with adaptability and learner talents are more likely to succeed than those without them. These talents are now required across the whole structural chain – from Representative to Manager, to Leader, to Technical Consultant, and across the wide and varied roles within the engagement process. The ability to learn and adapt is now critical within Pharma/ Healthcare and beyond.

## Selecting for adaptability and learning mindset

As with any other talent, predicting who will be adaptable requires a variety of assessment techniques, including:

- Occupational Personality Questionnaires (OPQs) that assess cognitive ability including reasoning, thinking and problem solving
- Interviews to assess personality factors, including results orientation, openness to new experiences and willingness to try new things
- Specific tools which assess mental toughness and the candidate's ability to confidently cope with change, difficulties and new environments.

Similar approaches can be used to assess whether candidates have a learning mind set. In his book *A Collection of Articles on Achieving High Performance in Teams within Pharma and Healthcare*, Tony Swift, a colleague at Apodi, stresses in the article entitled 'Moving on up' that successful executives must take charge of their own personal development and not rely on the employer to spoonfeed all learning.

Frankly, it is easy to spot this. Those executives who blame the employer for lack of development, or who are 'too busy' to dedicate time to learning, almost certainly do not have a learning mind set. Compare this to the 'learner' mind set, which sees individuals organising their working day to set aside time to ensure they keep up to date with developments in the marketplace, new innovations and the latest practices.

## Promoting adaptability and a learning mindset

Whilst it is important for individuals to take responsibility for their own development, this in no way absolves the organisation from also playing its part in developing a culture where adaptability and a learning mind set become ingrained. Whilst reviewing recruitment practices is, of course, a good start, unfortunately cultural change is more complex than this. Cultural change requires fundamental shifts in behaviours and these can be encouraged by:

- Bringing new people into the organisation with the appropriate talents, as above

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- Changing the organisational structure
- Short term objectives, incentives and controls that demand adaptability and learning.

In my own organisation, we have realised that it is critical for most of our employees to have an in-depth understanding of the NHS and how our services can best be applied for the benefit of our customers in such a rapidly changing environment. To ensure Apodi promotes this, the company is:

- Running regular workshops that are focused on 'Understanding the changing NHS and the Apodi proposition and how to apply it to the new market economy'
- Guidance to all individuals on how they can keep updated on all key developments through the use of the web, social media and other sources of information. Whilst guidance is provided, it is stressed that ultimately responsibility rests with the individual for their own personal development.

## Stability is a dangerous illusion

For a lot of people, the Pharmaceutical Industry has provided a stable career over many years. For example, there are many Sales Representatives who have had a successful career fundamentally doing the same job in the same way and often for the same employer. Whilst there will always be a need for Sales Representatives within the industry, the number has fallen and will continue to fall. And for many, the role itself will change and demand the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

Some companies are addressing the need to change rather quicker than others. Those that are slow to act may be creating a situation where some employees still feel they are operating in a relatively stable environment. This may be a dangerous illusion because it is almost guaranteed that the changing environment within the industry will impact on most employees – and probably sooner rather than later.

Given this situation, companies will increasingly be looking for employees who have the adaptability skill to cope with change and fundamental to this is a learning mind set. We believe this is relevant to all employees looking to advance with their current employer and to those looking for opportunities elsewhere. Both short-term and long-term career planning in the new age requires employees having a CV that clearly articulates the capacity to adapt and an in-depth understanding of the changing industry environment. For people with these talents, they should be able to look forward to a varied, rewarding and long-term career within the industry.

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