

Integrating Interims

A guide to preparing for
an interim hospital executive

This white paper outlines some of the key factors that hospitals should consider when choosing an interim, as well as measures that hospitals and health systems can take to prepare for an interim, once selected.

As hospitals face increasing demand for performance improvement and frequent turnover in leadership, the use of interim executives is rising. A growing number of hospitals and health systems are turning to interim talent to fill temporary vacancies in leadership, initiate immediate action to achieve significant change in a department, or mentor in-house managerial talent. As the deployment of interims becomes more commonplace, organizations that have never before needed to work with interim executives or clinical directors are choosing this option.

For hospitals or health systems new to the use of interims, the process of bringing in an outsider may seem daunting. Often, an interim is brought into an organization that is already facing considerable challenges in the wake of the departure of a key executive or director. Knowing how best to select and prepare for the incoming interim will ensure a smooth transition and allow the interim to quickly address critical issues.

Compass Clinical Consulting recently surveyed 25 seasoned interim executives and directors about the nature of interim work as viewed from the perspective of the interims themselves. Survey participants included interim Chief Executive Officers, Chief Nursing Officers, Chief Medical Officers, Chief Financial Officers, Vice Presidents of Quality, and Directors of the Operating Room and Emergency Department. Drawing from personal work experience, these interims highlighted the most important actions that organizations can take to ensure a smooth transition and a successful engagement.

When asked what a hospital or health system should do to properly prepare for an interim's arrival, the survey responses centered on three core themes: Logistical preparation, on-site orientation and introductions, and advance communication with staff, supervisors, physicians, and other key stakeholders.

Logistical Preparations

Though it might seem obvious, incoming interims need to be equipped with the physical resources necessary to function within a hospital setting. Like permanent employees, interims need access not only to the organization's facilities, but also to its computer and email systems. Interim executives and directors should be given ID badges, computer access, office keys, parking permits, beepers, and hospital email addresses, as appropriate to the engagement. In some cases, it may be necessary for the incoming interim to undergo tests or screenings to comply with the hospital's employee health policies. By ensuring that these necessities are provided prior to the interim's arrival, organizations guarantee their interims ready access to the tools they need to achieve the stated goals. Advance logistical preparation on the part of a hospital or health system allows interim executives and directors to immediately begin to address their work, rather than wasting time taking care of the "little things."

Often, interim executives and directors travel great distances to work in their assigned hospitals. Some, but not all, interim placement firms will organize the logistics of travel and accommodation for their interims. However, this task sometimes falls to the hospital or health system in which the interim will be working. Some organizations are better able to manage costs by arranging housing and transportation for the interim well ahead of the interim's arrival.

Perhaps more importantly, it is advantageous to provide interims with a current list of key resource personnel within the organization. As a newcomer to your hospital or health system, the interim executive or director will quickly need to become acquainted with departmental leadership across the organization. This information will help the interim to understand reporting structures, as well as give easy access to the people with whom they will work in the coming weeks and months.

On-Site Orientation and Introductions

When an interim arrives on a hospital's campus, it is crucial that he or she is quickly able to assimilate into the "flow" of the organization. One important element of this integration process involves familiarizing the interim with the organization's physical layout, key personnel and culture. As a first step to establishing this knowledge base, the interim should be given an accelerated orientation to the hospital's facilities, including a tour. It is important that these executives and directors gain a high level of familiarity with the physical layout of the organization in which they will work. In addition, an introductory tour of facilities gives interims initial visibility to hospital staff, building their identity and credibility within the organization.

It is also critical that the organization schedule introductory meetings between the incoming interim and key managers, physicians, direct reports, and other staff within the department. Setting aside significant time for the interim to meet with direct reports lays the foundation

for a productive and successful interim engagement. These initial meetings ensure that interims are fully briefed as to the nature of their assignments and the goals that they are expected to meet. Establishing clarity of purpose early on is key to achieving the organization's stated objectives. Meetings with managers, staff, and physicians will also allow interim executives and directors to begin forming positive relationships with the necessary coworkers.

Since interims manage the hospital's staff, they should be familiar with the organization's policies. For example, schedule time with human resources so the interim can learn about managing employees, including recruitment, discipline, and performance evaluation. The interim should also be provided information about other distinctive organizational management practices, such as any ongoing cultural change initiatives, performance improvement, or continuous readiness for regulatory surveys.

Advance preparation allows interim healthcare executives to immediately address their work and become incorporated into the “flow” of the hospital.



Advance Communication

Finally, to prepare for an interim healthcare executive or clinical director, administrators must have a strategy for communicating this decision with their staff. The introduction of an interim executive or director into a hospital or health system that may already be facing challenges can often be a perplexing or even unpopular move. Questions will no doubt circulate among staff and physicians as to why an in-house “acting” director was not named, or why it is necessary to bring someone in from “the outside.”

There are many legitimate reasons to engage an interim executive or director. Occasionally, a hospital or system simply needs to keep things running smoothly while searching for the right permanent candidate. In other scenarios, problems in a department may run so deep that a change in leadership is needed to make necessary improvements. Regardless of the rationale behind choosing the interim option, the organization should be prepared to answer the “why” question.

Most importantly, the organization should clarify the interim’s exact role within the hospital structure and level of authority to affect change. Is the interim a “place-holder” in an already high-functioning operation? Or is the interim expected to make changes that will improve operations and prepare the organization for the new hire? Determining how the interim is to function and clarifying his or her position with the relevant managers, staff, and physicians will ultimately lead to greater effectiveness and better working relationships.

In Summary

Though the rationale behind hiring an interim executive or director is different for every organization, the ultimate goal is usually the same—to provide the highest-quality, most efficient patient care possible. Following the careful selection of an interim, adequate preparation for the arrival of an interim is one of the most important steps toward attaining that goal. Defining objectives and deliverables should always be the first priority when engaging an interim executive or clinical director.

Addressing the logistical needs of the incoming interim provides the tools necessary for success, while on-site orientations and introductions allow the newcomer to hit the ground running. Furthermore, advance communication with staff, supervisors, physicians, and other key stakeholders prior to an interim's arrival will lay the cultural groundwork for a successful interim engagement. For hospitals or health systems utilizing interims, proper preparation may not require extraordinary effort, but it will go a long way toward achieving success.



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