Ghosting in Healthcare Recruitment:
Unveiling the Causes & Strategies to Prevent it

By Gina Donnelly & Connie Mitchell

The healthcare industry is a dynamic and demanding field, with recruitment processes that are equally challenging. One troubling trend that has emerged in recent years is "ghosting," where candidates or employers abruptly cease communication without explanation. This phenomenon, once primarily associated with dating, has now permeated professional environments, including healthcare recruitment.

This challenge is not only perplexing but can also be a significant hindrance in filling essential medical positions. Understanding why this happens and developing strategies to ensure consistent follow-up are critical steps in enhancing the recruitment process.

Let's begin with the "why."

Competitive Job Market

The healthcare sector is characterized by its highly competitive nature, with a constant demand for qualified professionals. This competition often results in candidates applying to multiple positions simultaneously. If a candidate receives an offer they deem more favorable whether due to location, salary, or work-life balance, they may choose to disappear rather than decline other offers professionally. On the flip side, employers may also ghost candidates if they find a more suitable hire or if a candidate no longer fits their evolving needs.

2022 AMA Report
Physician Shortages

■ PCP ■ Medical ■ Surgical ■ Other (Behavioral Health, PMR)
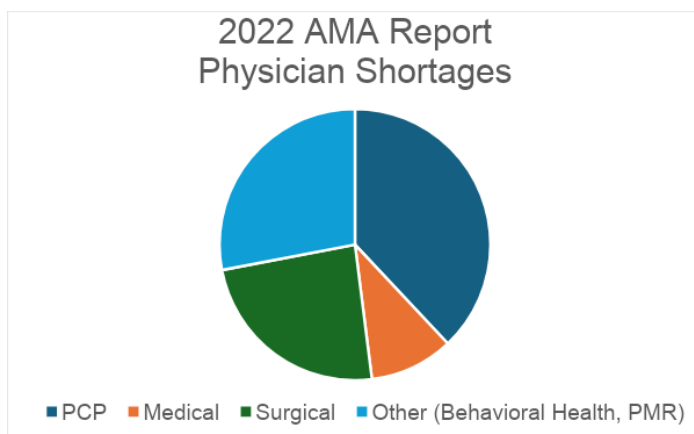
Overwhelmed Hiring Managers

Recruitment in healthcare is a high-stakes endeavor, often dealing with multiple vacancies at once, each requiring specific qualifications. As one can imagine, hiring managers and HR professionals can become overwhelmed. A 2020 report by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) noted that 18% of healthcare organizations reported downsizing their HR departments[1].

In this scenario, communication with less suitable candidates can fall by the wayside. When priorities shift, and time becomes scarce, following up with every applicant becomes less of a priority, leading to ghosting.

Communication Breakdowns

Inadequate communication systems and unclear recruitment processes contribute significantly to ghosting. Healthcare organizations, especially large ones, may lack streamlined communication channels between departments or with candidates. For instance, if a recruiter fails to inform a candidate about their status or delays providing feedback, candidates may feel neglected and withdraw themselves from the process, effectively ghosting the employer. Similarly, organizations may fail to communicate rejection or next steps promptly, leaving candidates in limbo.

Negative Experiences and Mismatched Expectations

Candidates who have previously faced unprofessional behavior or unrealistic job descriptions may choose to ghost as a defense mechanism. If a candidate senses red flags such as ambiguous job roles, lack of transparency about salary, or a toxic workplace culture, they might opt to vanish rather than confront the situation. On the employer's side, if a candidate demonstrates unprofessional behavior during interviews or does not align with the organization's culture, the employer might decide not to communicate further, leading to ghosting.

Fear of Conflict or Rejection

Fear of rejection or conflict is a psychological factor driving ghosting behavior in healthcare recruitment. Candidates may find it uncomfortable to reject a job offer or discuss their decision to withdraw from the recruitment process. Ghosting can feel like an easier route compared to directly confronting potential employers. Similarly, hiring managers may avoid uncomfortable conversations with candidates they do not plan to hire, opting instead for silence.

Technology and Impersonal Recruitment Processes

The increasing reliance on digital recruitment platforms has also contributed to ghosting. Automated systems and online applications often depersonalize the hiring process, making it easier for both parties to disappear without consequence. When interactions occur solely through emails or automated systems, candidates and employers alike may feel less obligated to maintain communication, leading to a greater likelihood of ghosting.

Impact of Pandemic and Burnout

The COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of complexity to healthcare recruitment. The surge in demand for healthcare workers has led to accelerated hiring processes and, in some cases, less rigorous communication protocols. Simultaneously, burnout among healthcare professionals may lead to candidates withdrawing from job searches without notice.

According to the latest survey data for the American Medical Association (AMA), 48.2% of physicians reported experiencing at least one symptom of burnout in 2023. This is a decrease from the record-high burnout rate of 62.8% in 2021, a sharp rise from 38% in 2020[2]. The decline in burnout rates is a positive step forward, but the healthcare industry must remain vigilant in its efforts to support physicians and create a sustainable work environment. Addressing physician well-being should be a top priority as the industry continues to recover and adapt post-pandemic.

Health Care Burnout Rates 2020 - 2030
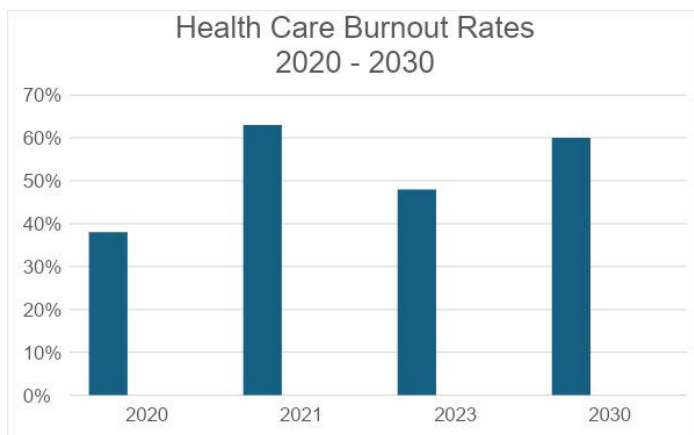
Now that we addressed why ghosting occurs, let's discuss strategies candidates and employers can take to prevent it from happening.

Personalized Communication: Employers should take the time to research and understand the candidates' background, interests, and career goals. Personalized messages that demonstrate a genuine understanding of the applicant's unique situation are more likely to elicit a response. Mentioning specific achievements, areas of specialization, or personal interests can make the communication feel more relevant and engaging.

Employers should also clearly articulate their expectations to candidates should they decide to withdraw from consideration.

Transparent and Honest Engagement: Transparency is key to building trust. Employers should be upfront about the details of the job, including compensation, location, work-life balance, and potential challenges. Honesty helps set realistic expectations and fosters a positive relationship.

Respect and Professional Follow-Up: Employers should strike a balance between persistence and respect. Sending multiple follow-up messages is appropriate, but they should be spaced out and vary in content to avoid being perceived as pushy. Including a clear call to action and an easy way to respond can also facilitate engagements.

Leveraging Multiple Channels: Utilizing different communication channels, such as email, phone calls, LinkedIn, and even professional conferences, can increase the chances of connecting with candidates. Some may prefer digital communications, while others might respond better to personal interactions.

Providing Value Beyond Job Offers: Employers can build long-term relationships by offering value beyond job opportunities. Sharing industry insights, career advice, or updates on relevant trends can keep the candidate engaged and view the employer as a valuable resource, not just a job matchmaker.

Being Sensitive to Timing: Understanding the typical work schedules and busiest times for candidates can help employers choose the best times to reach out. Being mindful of their time constraints and offering flexible scheduling for discussions can make it easier for candidates to engage.

Ghosting is a common challenge in healthcare recruitment driven by many factors. However, employers can mitigate this issue by adopting personalized, transparent, and respectful communication strategies. By understanding the reasons behind ghosting and proactively addressing them, healthcare employers can foster better relationships, enhance trust, and ultimately improve the chances of successful placements. If your organization wants to avoid the pitfalls of ghosting, Corazon can step in as your recruitment partner to leverage our expertise and keep candidates engaged.

Contact Corazon at 412-364-8200 or visit our website to learn more!

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