Transformation of recruitment within the NHS.

What does it mean?

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Transformation of recruitment within the NHS

Introduction

The NHS is the UK's largest employer, with more than 1.5 million people. More than half of those are directly employed in clinical care (52.7%). We also know that the **average turnover of staff is just over 10%**, according to NHS Digital's data for 2024. That means that just to stand still with the right number of staff to provide clinical care, there will be around 80,000 vacancies that need to be filled each year. Add to that the increased clinical numbers as resources are diverted from support functions to care functions and you can see a real challenge: The NHS needs to employ more people with less resource!

That is why we need to look at Transformation in recruitment. This is not about fiddling with the margins and looking for fractional gains. There is a need to fundamentally address **how the NHS hires it staff** – and how it can do so whilst offering a better candidate experience; better quality of candidates; quicker hiring and – importantly – meaningful and accurate data that will demonstrate the improvements being made.

If that isn't enough – those 80,000 clinical vacancies cost the NHS hundreds of millions of pounds each year because each shift that is due to be worked by an NHS member of clinical staff needs to be covered if no-one is available. And that invariably means agency staff, who are hugely expensive.

As a quick anecdotal aside – my own sister worked for an NHS trust in the North West of England. She worked alongside an agency nurse who regularly travelled from London by train for her shifts. She earned so much as an agency nurse, that it was beneficial for her to travel to Manchester and work her shift whilst living in London, rather than secure a permanent position in the capital.

I know that is anecdotal, but I strongly suspect that many clinical staff will have their own stories and it is this type of inefficiency that frustrates so many people working across the NHS. If an agency nurse costs a trust around £350 a day (conservative estimate in my view) and there are just 20% of vacancies that need cover, then that would **cost the NHS £5.6m every day.**

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If the time to hire could be reduced by just 5 days, then the savings are £28m a year.

Those figures are very light – you will all know your own trust's figures and can do your own maths, but the principle is clear: look to transform the recruitment process and be seen as a positive force for change and efficiency (as a function) and not a negative overhead.

So, we have written this whitepaper to explore some of the key factors to address to achieve transformation of your recruitment function.

These are grouped under the following 6 key steps:

Step 1: Technology

Step 2: Data

Step 3: The candidate experience

Step 4: Onboarding

Step 5: Collaborate – join forces with your neighbours

Step 6: Efficiency

About the author

Chris Keeling – CEO and Founder of Jobtrain.co.uk.

Jobtrain are a leading provider of Recruitment Management Software based in the UK. They work with a wide variety of clients in both the public and private sector.

Notably they have been supporting the transformation of recruitment within NHS Scotland for the past 7 years and a growing number of NHS trusts in England.

Chris Keeling is the founder of the business and spent 7 years early in his career within the NHS, operating at both trust and District level. His role was focused very much on challenging and leading change within the HR and operational functions – and he worked closely with senior Nursing and clinical staff to align such change with the needs of the trust. It was this exposure to the challenge of the NHS that has led both Chris and Jobtrain to be passionate about delivering improvements to the NHS wherever it can.

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Step 1: Technology

All great journeys start with the first step – it may seem a long road, but it really doesn't have to be. Pioneers have already travelled down this road (metaphorically) and have paved the way, with signposts, to help resourcing functions across the UK become more efficient.

So, I will begin with technology. Please don't switch off and think this is going down a rabbit hole that will lose you – I promise I will stay on the surface and keep it quick!

For decades there have been just two providers of recruitment technology to the NHS – NHS Jobs and Trac. I think it is fair to say that neither platform has covered themselves in glory with state-of-the-art development; with innovation; with a client centric approach to addressing the changing demands.

Instead, we have seen something of a 'closed shop' where barriers to entry have existed that make it very difficult for other providers to offer support. But all of that is changing.

Jobtrain has been providing the recruitment technology to **NHS Scotland (NHSS) since 2018** and has helped deliver real benefits in terms of costs and efficiency. Let me quote just two testimonials from NHS Scotland:

"Our TIME TO HIRE has dropped by 31%. That is nearly 1 month per hire"

"We have seen a 250% INCREASE in application since using Jobtrain"

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The good news is that Jobtrain is now being adopted by trusts in England – enabled by the fact that Jobtrain has an API integration with ESR (as well as with NHS Jobs). In other words, it has a two-way, almost real time exchange of information between the systems that delivers reliability and speed.

But the technology is just an enabler. **It is listed first here because it is a building block.** Many of the other transformational goals are hampered by existing processes and that is often shaped by existing technology. As Steven Covey remarks "You can't change the fruit without changing the root". Changing your technology may be a more important step than you realise.

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Step 2: Data

I know this is another potential snooze button for some people. For others, I can sense you perking up and getting eager with anticipation!

In simple terms – **if you can measure it, you can improve it.** But getting meaningful measures out of the legacy systems has been something of a challenge. Just before the Government announced their demise, NHSE (NHS England) set out some key reporting data that they wanted every trust to report on.

When discussing with trusts how they would meet these reporting requests, it seemed that the current systems would require a lot of interrogation, of merging of data into separate files and then manual collation under the right headings. This process was estimated as taking a week to do, each month. However – the trusts working with Jobtrain - have had these reports built for them and can deliver the data, on all fronts, at the click of a button as and when it is needed.

What's more they can build their own reports within the system or export the whole data to their own 'data lake'. Something the MI specialists amongst you will appreciate!

It is that availability of timely, trustworthy, accurate data that is key to analysing performance and seeking improvement. A crucial second building block on the road to Transformation.

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Step 3: The candidate experience

Many trusts highlight this as a key element to securing candidates. But what is meant by this and **why is the candidate experience so important?**

To answer the last point, perhaps we need to look at why is the experience so flawed? For many, this discussion may be a research/academic exercise where we look at candidate behaviours and the changing requirements of Gen Z vs Millennials and their online behaviour etc.

However, for so many more, this is a simple reality that they face when seeking to apply for a role in the NHS. The application process itself can be, at best, described as 'unfriendly'. In NHS Jobs, the most used site for the NHS in the country, you need to first create a password of 12 characters or more. That is a lot of characters – and means that people often can't use their favourite passwords (or a simple derivative of). I mean, twelve?!

Having registered on the site, just to search for jobs – you then find one that you like and click 'Apply'. What happens? You are likely to be taken to the trust's own website where, as a candidate, you now must register again, with another password!

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Already you can get the sense that the experience isn't great – and that is before we get into the lengthy application forms.

So, let's look at some facts to kick start this part of Transformation and for this we are going to use real data obtained from surveying over 5,000 applicants and from tracking behaviour on the websites..

Fact No. 1:	**85% of candidates start their search for a new job on their mobile phone. And 72% then use their mobile phone to complete the application process.** Why is this so relevant? Because unless your own application process and jobs website is mobile friendly then you will lose people very quickly in the process, before they even apply! By not having a simple application form that can be completed via a mobile excludes those that do not have access to a computer/laptop/tablet.
Fact No. 2:	**The majority of people search for jobs in the evening (either in bed or in the bath)!** Why is this relevant? Lengthy, turgid advert copy is hardly going to grab a reader's attention at that point in the day. But shorter copy and video content within the advert has a hugely positive response. Which brings us to….
Fact No. 3:	**Adverts that contain video content are 25% more likely to be read than those that do not.** Enough said on that point really. If you don't remain convinced, just think of the fact that television adverts contain movement and colour – and more often than not, music! We aren't advocating music in all videos (although it's good to do so), but you wouldn't be very engaged with a TV advert that just showed you text on the screen and expected you to do the reading!

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Fact No. 4:

60% of applicants fail to complete an application form that takes longer than 15 minutes.

You really should ask yourself the question "do we really need this information at this stage"?

Jobtrain introduced a two-stage application process with the Isle of Man Government (IoM) a number of years ago. This allowed basic information to be captured at stage one (no more than 5 mins to complete). The employer could then contact anyone who was of possible interest to engage with them – something along the lines of "many thanks for applying for the role of XYZ. To assess your application further would you mind providing us with a little more information".

At this point, the candidate feels valued and is more amenable to investing their time in responding to more questions.

Not only does this help your own assessment of candidates, but the response from within IoM was fantastic – they reached 100% candidate satisfaction rate for the first time ever within 3 months of launching the two-stage process.

With this step you are now starting to transform the experience for the candidate – making your jobs more accessible and the application process easier.

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Step 4: Onboarding

As if finding and hiring the right candidate wasn't enough of a challenge then the world of onboarding moves it to a new level. And one that can be incredibly frustrating for all involved.

Shockingly, the time taken to onboard a new candidate can be longer than the rest of the hiring process put together. But let's have a look at the various components:

- **Issuing contracts**
- **Receiving signed and agreed contracts from new starters**
- **Ensuring the employment history has no gaps that will cause problems with CQC assessments**
- **Completing Right to Work documentation**
- **Undertaking the relevant DBS checks**
- **Obtaining and recording references**
- **Passing relevant information to internal departments – IT equipment needs; uniform requirements; payroll/new starter information, issuing security passes/lanyards etc**

For a recruitment system **not** to have built into it an onboarding facility is remarkable these days. It's like buying a new television but being told it only shows ITV.

That is why it is essential that the whole onboarding activity is capable of being managed within one system – making it seamless and providing visibility to the recruiter as to where candidates are at all stages of the process. A dashboard that informs the recruiter is a huge help!

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One client (Citizens Advice), who adopted onboarding, had this to say about their experience:

citizens advice

"Using the Onboarding module in Jobtrain was quite a big deal for us! Now, none of our onboarding is done separately – it's all done from within Jobtrain.

It's improved the candidate experience greatly because they go through a standardised process from beginning to end."

But linking these elements into one system doesn't just help the visibility, it also helps with the speed – with reminders being automated (to either the candidate, to the recruiter or to both). It is disappointing that **one of the core providers to the NHS doesn't even chase the DBS checks until 5 days have passed.** That is a potential additional 5-day delay for no obvious reason. Referring to the **Introduction**, there is a potential £28m saving straight away.

Onboarding is one area where we talk less about AI and more about IA – or Intelligent Automation. Looking at how parts of the process can have automation built in – so that relevant departments have information sent upon a 'trigger' (like a status change) can save huge amounts of time. Same with references requests – both to referees and with candidates. The Jobtrain system already automatically checks employment history for gaps and advises candidates before they submit that they must explain any gaps longer than 30 days.

They may seem like small changes, but when you want to transform your processes to deliver a hugely improved experience alongside efficiency savings, then it is the detail that sometimes matters!

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Step 5: Collaborate – join forces with your neighbours

One trend that we are increasingly seeing is for different authorities and trusts working together to achieve economies of scale.

Greater Manchester Councils – of which there are 12 - joined forces to collectively purchase a recruitment system that would allow for local identity/branding but would benefit from a common platform to allow for shared benefits.

NHS Scotland (NHSS) bought their ATS in support of a 'Once for Scotland' initiative that introduced standardisation into many of their processes and measures. Importantly, it also allowed a single purchase of a solution that covers all 22 Boards (trusts) and avoided that process being repeated innumerable times across the country at significant expense.

Within the NHS, we are now seeing groups of trusts joining forces to reap the rewards of enhanced purchasing power. But it is more than that within the NHS. We are talking with trusts who want to centralise their recruitment into Shared Service centres – meaning the recruitment activity can be carried out by one large team rather than, say 8 to 10 separate teams at trust level.

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Not only does this achieve headcount savings, but the advertising costs (which are huge in the NHS) will also be reduced. Simply by virtue of the fact that adverts can be run on a regional basis, with a single, impactful advertising campaign attracting a wider group of candidates.

Through the work we have done with NHSS this process is already operating in Scotland – and each candidate identifies what role type, what grade/pay and what location they are interested in. The system then 'sifts' these candidates and forwards them to the relevant recruiters responsible for their areas of interest. Speedy and efficient. The by-words for Transformation!

Of course, one huge benefit of adopting a regional approach is the fact that data can be gathered across all trusts and across the region. This will give insights into how many vacancies there are per trust, or per department across the Region. Along with data on time to hire, and insights on the length of each stage of the process – key to achieving improvement.

The data will also allow for verification of policies (ED&I being an obvious one) – are such policies proving effective? And if not, then where are they falling short? Is it in attracting candidates from diverse backgrounds? Or is it because the application form itself is causing applicants to drop out at certain stages? There may be many more reasons, but the point remains constant: Measure it and you can improve it.

Step 6: Efficiency

All the previous steps towards Transformation must have **one common goal in mind: efficiency**. It is no secret that within the NHS there is a widespread demand to drive down costs, reduce waste and improve efficiency.

So once again let me share some facts gained from surveys and direct **client data** after adopting a new ATS:

31 days to fill a role

NHS

NHS Property Services report that there's been "a major reduction in time-to-hire. It now takes on average 31 days to fill a role."

Eliminated interview no-shows

Local Government

60% drop-off at interviews has now been eliminated since using Jobtrain for the Borough of King's Lynn and West Norfolk Council.

73% faster DBS checks

Government

The Isle of Man Government's DBS checks used to average 38 days. Since using Jobtrain that's now 10 days.

2 minutes to complete offers

Care

Active Care Group's offer process now takes just takes 2 minutes. Previously it would average one week.

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61% decrease in time to apply

Healthcare

Benenden Health said: "A 90-minute ordeal is now just a 35-minute process from a candidate's perspective."

Time to hire now under 3 weeks

Care

Before Jobtrain, Cornerstone Care averaged 90 days from interview to start date. Now, they've cut time-to-hire to under 3 weeks.

Agency fees cut by 75%!

Facilities Services

Bellrock cut their recruitment agency fees by 75%.

90% faster approvals

Printing Services

For Eurostampa, it could take between 1 and 2 weeks to approve a job and post an advert. Now it'll just take 1-2 days to get a job approved and live.

Just 2 days to onboard

Charity

Citizens Advice - It used to take an average of 3 to 4 weeks to get a candidate through onboarding. Now it's just a couple of days.

32% decrease in days between application and offer

IT Services and IT Consulting

Roke - the number of days between application received and offer made has decreased by 32%.

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Conclusion

What this last section above demonstrates are examples of significant changes in outcomes and efficiencies, all achieved by changing the technology at the outset.

But not just the tech that will drive Transformation - it's about the mindset, the goals and the desire.

It may be easy to say the start point will be to know what the bottlenecks and pain points in your own processes are. But saying that and identifying them may not always be easy without accurate means of measuring.

Start with those you do know For example: how many applications per role? How much is spent on agency fees? How much is spent on advertising? How long are vacancies open for before being filled?

 If you can start there, then any business case for investment in technology should be compelling. The spend in comparison to the return will be outstandingly positive. Anything that delivers pay-back in less than 12 months is always seen positively. When you can demonstrate payback in a matter of weeks/months then maybe the investment you need in a new system becomes more attainable?

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Remember – **"all meaningful and lasting change starts on the inside and works its way out" (Lou Tice).** Meaning that you need to ensure your team are all committed to Transforming the function. If not, you run the risk of sabotage and negative mindsets. In short, change cannot simply be imposed onto the teams if you want them to deliver that change with you.

Instead, we believe that once resourcing teams are given the tools and if they understand the goal is to drive performance (efficiency), then they act as positive agents for that change and drive the results. The evidence for this? **In section 6 above**, we quoted many examples of efficiency gains that have been realised by organisations using Jobtrain. Whilst we would love to say that this is simply because they chose the right ATS, it isn't the case.
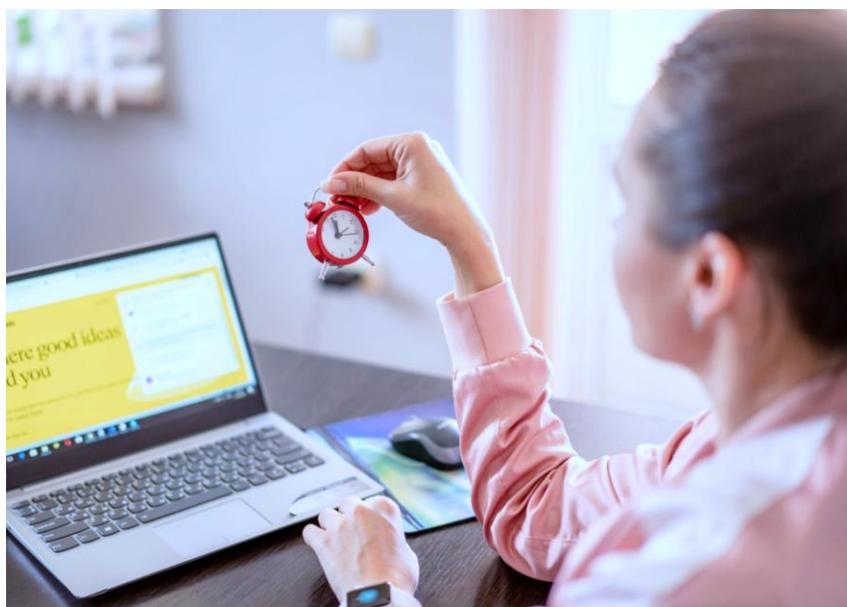
Choosing the right technology partner is key – but all those efficiencies were attained because the teams adapted to the changes, embraced them and then delivered the results.

Just remember, you are not alone on this journey. I said in the **introduction** that some people have already started this journey and are paving the way. We, at Jobtrain, are currently working with Mid-Yorkshire Hospitals NHS trust and Leicestershire Community Partnership NHS trust.

When going through the implementation, we saw some very different processes – neither right nor wrong, just different. The outcome of this was some good, shared learning and understanding of where improvements could be made.

Much of that is facilitated by our own Success Consultants who work with clients in ensuring the system is implemented to deliver the outcomes you want. And that includes the engagement, training and winning of the hearts and minds of the user community. As I said above – you are not alone on this journey, you just need to start with a positive first step.

How can we help?

Read about **our work with other NHS organisations here** or contact us for an informal chat and we'll be happy to show you how we support other NHS trusts.