

Building Culture from the Ground Up

Using PI behavioral data to optimize talent in remote contact-tracing teams

Partners In Health is a Boston-based organization committed to providing health care resources to underserved populations around the world. [Services like theirs](#) are in especially high demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has re-exposed disparities in health care access.

When the pandemic hit, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts recognized the need to establish robust contact-tracing operations. And so they approached PIH, who helped fill an immediate public health need while creating job opportunities at a time of deep economic strife.

The challenge was to build a cohesive team of remote contact tracers on the fly. There's no real blueprint here. Willing and able bodies [are in extremely high demand](#). They can't be trained fast enough, but no one has assembled remote teams at this scale before.

Fortunately, [GattiHR](#) is a trusted partner. And GattiHR CEO Tom Connolly has experience building teams in times of crisis. His expertise in talent optimization and understanding of behavioral styles has helped PIH establish needed culture after making its initial round of hires.

These contact tracers are generally people who share a sense of purpose, but have never worked in this field before, let alone together. In some cases, they're not even applying for a specific role. Connolly and GattiHR have helped PIH make sense of the talent influx—and ultimately optimize it.

“There's no muscle memory for this—
every single person in the company is new.”
Tom Connolly, CEO, GattiHR

Sharing a cause, and little else

Patriotism. Altruism. Duty. Compassion.

Those are a few of the motivators Connolly cited when asked what's driving people to get involved with contact tracing. As he explained, it's a collective calling reminiscent of what we saw post-9/11, when many were compelled to enlist in the military or join Homeland Security.

These are often the only ties that bind. Maybe the biggest challenge PIH has dealt with is the variety they're seeing in candidates. Their resumes, or “briefcases,” so to speak, are all over the board. But during a pandemic, urgency is heightened, and hires need to be made quickly.

“We have a strong sense of what makes a great contact tracer, but the more we can learn along the way, the more effective we're going to be,” Connolly explained. “We don't have the luxury of time, so we have to learn as we go.”

Instead, PIH has focused on maintaining a positive work environment. That means putting a premium on behavioral drivers and cultural fit. Of course, when you build an operation from scratch, it's tough to articulate what that culture looks like. According to Connolly, three attributes are paramount:

- Empathy
- Attention to detail
- Resilience

The rest, said Connolly, can be learned. He went on to say that, moving forward, both with PIH and future partners, behavioral data will be essential. He hopes to deploy an understanding of [team work styles](#), as well as strategies for how remote workers need to communicate.

“When you read through these candidates’ applications, it's not because they need a job—it's because they just feel like they've got to do something to help knock this down.”

Tom Connolly

Establishing a team through behavioral criteria

In April and May alone, PIH hired nearly 2,000 people. Some estimates say [upwards of 300,000 contact tracers](#) will be needed by this summer to help contain the spread of the coronavirus in the U.S. Gatti has since engaged in additional partnerships in Massachusetts and Virginia, and is administering PI assessments to every candidate. At that scale, Connolly called the effort “as direct a performance optimization environment as you can have.”

The PIH opportunity came together very quickly. Supervisors oversee an average of 12 tracers, but never meet them in person. That makes understanding their behavioral styles all the more pivotal.

“We’ve just launched a partnership with the Institute for Public Health Innovation to build an operation for Fairfax County, VA. I want every supervisor to know the PI profile of the people that they are suddenly in charge of, who they’ve never met,” Connolly said.

The other thing PI can do is generate interview questions. That’s especially helpful when the candidate field is so varied, yet as Connolly explained, there are just three distinct roles:

- **Case investigators** speak to the patient first. They need to be empathetic but perseverant, conscious of the person’s delicate situation while still focused on pulling data (the first-level contacts).
- **Tracers** function like journalists, systematically sorting through the COVID-positive patient’s contacts. Empathy and persistence are essential as they share unwelcome news with people for the first time—and are frequently met with resistance and denial.
- **Care coordinators** need to display empathy in its purest sense, serving as points of contact for those seeking treatment. But they’re also local experts, required to impart intimate knowledge of resources ranging from testing centers to Meals on Wheels.

Each role is daunting in its own way. As Connolly noted, aside from simply getting people to pick up the phone, you’re asking people who may be asymptomatic (and resistant to the very notion of contact) to alter their way of life.

“They’re selling behavioral change when they ask people to quarantine.”

Tom Connolly

Establishing a remote company culture

How do you measure empathy? When interviewers ask prompted questions, they're assessing which direction the candidate takes their answer: *Is the response happening in an empathic way?*

Beyond that, Connolly said his experience with PI has been instrumental in helping put those answers in context. In addition to core values, you need to [assemble a high-functioning team](#). You need complementary work styles and you need to grasp how certain behavioral drives might be accentuated or stretched [when people work remotely](#). **You need people who are both self-sufficient and self-aware.**

Connolly is no greenhorn when it comes to crisis management. He cut his teeth in what's known as "disaster HR." His background includes Enron, LTCM, Lehman Brothers and more than 40 corporate restructurings. He's seen firsthand how catastrophic events can catalyze dramatic career change in ways people can't even explain.

He sees PI's tools being even more impactful as operations like PIH build out training programs and develop their cultures. He envisions using what Gatti has learned already to help assess a candidate's readiness, but also train future hires.

"We'll be able to tell them in advance, 'Look, this is how you're going to respond,'" Connolly explained. "You have to be in the zone and present so that a certain reaction doesn't happen, because that reaction is deleterious to what you're trying to get done."

What they're "trying to get done" is contain a pandemic. It's the tallest of orders. Role playing alone won't prepare candidates for telling someone they came into contact with a COVID-positive acquaintance. Experience is the best teacher there is.

But through the use of behavioral data, and with a clear sense of the culture they're trying to create, GattiHR *can* help control the types of people they put in those pivotal positions.

Empathetic people. Sincere people. People who are driven by something more than a job—a sense of duty and humanity. Those are the traits at the heart of a frontline worker.