



# The Essential Guide To Senior Living Recruiting



Tom Zeleny

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**Tinamarie:** Welcome everyone. I have a fascinating expert with me today. I have Tom Zeleny of **Aspen Associates Group** out in Colorado. Tom, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Tom:** It's my pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity.

**Tinamarie:** Thank you. I am just going to give our listeners a little bit info about you. Having maintained an active administrator's license for over 20 years, Tom Zeleny has worked for prestigious national and privately owned providers for the for profit and not for profit sectors as an administrator and executive director. In addition to earning his professional certification by the American College of Healthcare Administrators, he received a certificate of gerontology from Colorado State University and also served as an expert consultant for a state board of nursing home administrators. Tom is often sought out by leaders in senior housing and long term care who recognize the need to attract the industry's best talent. His unique, hands on experience has helped him consistently place candidates in senior living positions throughout the United States since 2003. Through Aspen Associates Group's extensive network of relationships and their deep dive qualification process, they are able to identify and secure individuals who represent the top tier of professionals. So Tom, you have some really great credentials for what you are doing. Not only do you recruit in this space, but you are the person who has been recruited. That's great.

**Tom:**

*"I like to say I have worked on both sides of the desk. So I do have a lot of alphabet soup that follows my name, but what it means to everyone I work with, I have walked a mile in those shoes and I can understand what it is like from the candidate and from the client side and use that background and experience to best match both candidates and clients with the best opportunities."*



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**Tinamarie:** That is a wonderful, wonderful expertise that is really unique it seems. Your clients and candidates must benefit from all of that.

**Tom:** Well I think so. I think oftentimes you can tell when someone is outside their level of comfort. Some recruiters have worked in other fields and then think that maybe healthcare is the best avenue to look into. It does not take long from speaking with someone who has not really been involved in each step of the business to find out or to identify that this is something that is new to them, and again, I think that background and experience just helps with the qualification process and understanding what our clients are looking for as well.

**Tinamarie:** Great. Let us jump in because I know that you are a very busy person and our listeners are busy, so let us get going with the first question.

**Tom:** Very well.

**Tinamarie:** What are the biggest challenges you have seen in attracting and procuring talent, especially in the senior living sector?

**Tom:** That is a great question. I think really one of the biggest challenges is getting their positions noticed. We are seeing that there are only half of the people that we truly want today versus even 3 years ago, and that is because a lot of people are retiring. They are leaving the industry, they are different economic conditions, changes of ownerships. People are just working more hours now. They are working weekends, and they are keeping their heads down.

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*"These are the kind of people that I call who are buried in success and are not necessarily looking to make a change, so the people who are trying to find these wonderful candidates, these wonderful people who are working for their competitors, just are not as aware of what is out there and are not necessarily looking to make a change with their employment situation."*

**Tinamarie:** So it seems like the candidates are almost hidden.

**Tom:** They are.

**Tinamarie:** You have to seek them out.

**Tom:** It is difficult for clients to really have access to that group of individuals who are the high performers.





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**Tinamarie:** Wow. That is great insight. When you do find these candidates and you are reviewing the resume, how do you know that they are truly a right fit for an organization? Can you tell by just what is on paper or LinkedIn?

**Tom:** You cannot always tell just from a document. I see a lot of people who may not be professional interviewers. Maybe it has been a while since they have put together a resume, and it really looks more like a job description. One of my colleagues said people are paid for accomplishments, not responsibilities. So in looking at that resume, in senior living we really need to pull out a number of quantifiable, measurable accomplishments and that can include quality of care. It can include net operating income, whether it be from a revenue standpoint or an expense management component, satisfaction as it pertains to residents and staff, occupancy percentages, and labor management. So saying that you are able to run a community consistent with the rules and regulations is really a minimum standard of what would need to be done for that particular organization.



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So in talking with that executive, we really need to drill down and ask the “so what” questions. When I say “so what” I am very cognizant, I do not want to talk down to the candidate, but we really need to find out. If they say that I have implemented a quality assurance program, well that is great, so what was the outcome? What were you able to accomplish by doing that? We really look at, if they are talking about increasing occupancy, wonderful, so you were able to increase the occupancy by how much in what period of time? So when a candidate is able to explain, and we help them come up with what those accomplishments are at times by just drilling in and looking at their accomplishments, then the employer can say, wow, this person was able to increase occupancy from 67% to 94% within 6 months. That is very measurable, and those are some of the things that we are noticing are not necessarily evident on a resume when we receive it.

**Tinamarie:** So it seems that senior living is truly unique because your metrics for being fit is not only just what are they doing numbers wise, but also the human aspect because it is very . . .

**Tom:** Absolutely. You bet.

**Tinamarie:** Human industry.

**Tom:** Right. So looking at satisfaction, as I have mentioned, we look at what the residents’ satisfaction is as well as the employee satisfaction. Both of those have secondary outcomes. The resident satisfactions could be tied to occupancy, and the staff satisfaction could be tied to annualized turnover, which all trickles down to the bottom line.

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*"So again, what we are looking for is what compelling reasons and what measurable accomplishments has this person done and being able to demonstrate that time and time again so we can identify it is not a fluke. It is something that they can consistently do from one organization to the other. That it is something that can be replicable and very highly valued with what our clients are looking for."*

**Tinamarie:** That is fantastic insight. Do you feel that technology has created a less personal approach to the initial hiring process? With senior living, how is that working with technology?

**Tom:** I do see a lot of disconnect between what clients are looking for and actually being able to interface with prospective candidates. Parsing agents and keyword searches can limit what candidates are looked at for opportunities and also there are some words, like summa cum laude as it pertains to their educational background, will sometimes reject a resume due to perceived inappropriate wording. So we need to really make sure that the right people are connected with the right qualifying agents, whether they be internal human resources or hiring managers or what have you. We have seen from a technology standpoint some limitations. Older employees are not as comfortable with the technologies as we are seeing with younger generations. The younger generations tend to do well with multitasking. They have shorter attention spans, and they respond best to text and emails, not as much so with phone. We have also found out that some of our Millennial candidates may not have as honed face-to-face interviewing skills. So they use social media as a networking process to even connect with some of the current employees with a potential organization to get to know the culture and have an idea about the company before they even apply.

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*"So we have seen a lot of changes with technology, but I think really finding the best person is a blend of a mix of using technology and also using the personal approach to have conversations and vet out who the key performers are versus those who have not really demonstrated those accomplishments."*

**Tinamarie:** Great. It is nice to hear that the blend is happening. You had alluded to earlier some people starting to retire, things like that. With more baby boomers getting ready to retire, are you seeing a huge change in demographics of candidates? Are you finding that there is a candidate shortage because there are just not as many people as there were in the baby boomer generation?

**Tom:** Absolutely. I think for the first time ever, if you walk into a skilled nursing facility or an assisted living community and look at the people who are providing care and services and interacting with these residents, we are going to see a cross section of employees that we have never seen before. We see 4 generations working side by side. Granted, the mature employees, those people we are seeing fewer and fewer working each year, but they still have an influence over the quality of the organization because they tend to have a really strong work ethic and add value to the organization. They tend to be more productive. They are working longer hours. They are not threatened by the younger employees who are working there, but really what it is doing is creating a perfect storm because we have more of a demand for services with the greying of America ("the baby-boomers" who are needing care and services) and we have less people who are actually working in that environment.



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*"To answer your question, absolutely, we are seeing a lot of challenges finding not only the quality of people but the numbers of individuals to provide the care and services."*

**Tinamarie:** Wow. It is really interesting that you say that there are really 4 generations at work together. That is probably one of the last industries where we are seeing that stand.

**Tom:** Indeed. As I mentioned, the people who have gone through the Depression are working more in the later years of their life. We are seeing them retire and tend to exit the workforce, but at the same time it is just a real compression between a lot of different values and work ethics working together and the challenges of managing such a diverse workforce and determining what works best with each individual based on their personal experiences and how they have grown up.

**Tinamarie:** That is great. Can you share some tips and strategies for managing the hiring process to increase talent attraction procurement, especially since you are saying there is such a huge age span? You are working with the youngest of generations looking to get a position and maybe even some more experienced folks that just want something to do. How do we attract them?

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**Tom:** In looking at the economy, we have a thriving economy. In a depressed economy, it would be pretty simple. In the past, when we have gone through depressions economically a client could post a job, whether it be on the internet or pay for a posting service, and then look at the people who had applied for the position, interview, and hire the best person. That worked well in that environment and a lot of clients are trying to do the same thing even though we have this perfect storm of a great improving economy, lessening workforce, and greater demand for these numbers of people.

So your internal HR or talent acquisition specialist really cannot handle working on 37 openings and do that correctly because they have other tasks that they are working on. They are having employees ask them about FMLA, and they may have another person who is wanting to talk about OSHA compliance and their particular department, maybe another department manager wants to talk to them about a questionable termination, wanting to make sure they have gone through everything, they have to handle employee grievances, 401Ks, so they have got a bunch of stuff circling around their desk that they need to do. When we take on a job what we end up doing is we come up with a list of 100 to 125 prospects, and these are the kinds of people that we were talking about earlier who are buried in success. They are working long hours. They are making their bonuses. They are not looking to make a change. These people need to be contacted 5 to sometimes 7 times before we follow back up and are able to have that dialog and conversation with an individual.

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In a recent search that we were just conducting last month for a COO, the person that was hired that we ended up presenting to the client was an individual who had called back after the 7th attempt that we made to get in touch with them. So there is the time element that I think is difficult for clients to be able to get the right people. So I guess to answer your question, to give them something to take away, the best way that they can manage the process is by setting deadlines, by communicating to staff and the candidates what the timeframes are in which both will have mutual respect, and to move swiftly through the process because if throughout the process they are not extending an offer, these candidates are going to continue to interview until they find something and they may not necessarily take the best offer, but they are more inclined to take the first offer. So expediency is key and paramount to getting the best people.

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**Tinamarie:** It sounds like a little bit of persistence too if there is a candidate you really want to interview.

**Tom:** Going back to that individual, I think the first 2 or 3 attempts that we made to reach that person probably just went to their deleted voicemail items and the 4th one they actually said, "Well, you know, I should probably call this person back" and got busy. The 5th one they wrote it down on their Day Planner and something came up. By the 6th call, and I was starting to give up on that person, I am glad I did not. By the 7th call they said they wrote my name and phone number on their desk blotter and that was the best call, the most important call they have ever made to be able to call back which started the process that ended up culminating in their offer and acceptance of a new COO opportunity. It was a win-win for everyone, but without the persistence that person would probably still be at their prior organization.

**Tinamarie:** That is a great story. Now let us see if we can change some gears.

**Tom:** You bet.

**Tinamarie:** That was an uplifting story to share with people. Be quick. Be persistent. Get that candidate. But do you have any war stories? Anything that did not go so great and maybe the candidate was really turned off? What are the biggest turnoffs that you find?

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**Tom:** Absolutely. Really in looking at the best way to expedite the process is to look at efficiencies and making sure that the best person could be hired by speaking with the people within the organization who have a stake in that person's success. So we have had one client that we have worked with that we really helped with their onboarding process. They had a number of different steps where they would interview with the individual. First, they had to fill out an application. After, we forwarded that information to the client. The client wanted the candidate to come in and they wanted to see what that person looked like, see how professional they were when they filled out the application. Then the application was given to the executive. The executive would interview that person by phone, and if they liked that person the executive would have the candidate come in for a face-to-face interview. If that ended up working out well, then the candidate would interview with a group of peers who would be working at the client's location. If that went well, then there was telephone interview with a regional director of clinical services. If that went well, then there would be a psychologist who would call and do a very in-depth analysis of their personality and background. Then they would end up flying out to the corporate office and having a number of different interviews, speaking with 10 different people over an 8-hour period of time, many of which were in panel type of interviews. If that ended up working out well, then we would check references.

So with that whole process, we are probably looking at a 60-day period of time and that is prior to the offer being extended and accepted and the person having to give a 30-day notice. So when we are talking about people looking to make a change and being proactive, a lot of people will just either run out of steam, lose interest, have another offer, and be excluded from the interview process.

**Tinamarie:** Wow. That is a very long and sensitive process.



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**Tom:** To our client's credit, in looking at the longevity with people who went through that long process and then when we worked with them to reduce the hiring period of time from 60 days from the point of time that we presented a candidate to the point of time that we had an offer, we reduced that to about 22 or 23 days and then we went back and looked at the longevity and there was absolutely no difference in turnover for those key positions. Actually we were able to demonstrate a better longevity with less turnover than their prior methodology of doing that.

*"Again, it is a balancing act. We need to make sure that we vet the appropriate candidates and have our clients do the same, but also be respectful and mindful of the process that in getting the best people we need to move quickly."*

**Tinamarie:** That is a great story. It has a nice happy ending which is great.

**Tom:** I am glad I could share some of my happy ending stories with you today.

**Tinamarie:** We like happy endings. We learn best from things that did not go great. We do not say that you failed. You learned. This is a great example of how you helped the client learn and better their process. Wonderful. Now, after you took all of this time to vet the candidate, you found that hidden gem and you got them into the process, and it was great. They have an offer on the table. What advice can you share in regards to handling counteroffers? Because it seems like, especially if you are going through a longer process, that it can just feel like everything was done for naught.

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**Tom:** Counteroffers can really wreak havoc on the entire process. This is something that we work with our candidates typically from the 2<sup>nd</sup> conversation moving forward. The 1<sup>st</sup> conversation would be vetting, qualifying, determining interest. From that point forward we bring up the counteroffers very early in the conversation.

*In the 14+ years that I have been recruiting and not including the 13+ years that I have run communities, I have only heard of one instance where a candidate was happy with their decision to accept a counteroffer.*

So we like to think about how this process will unfold and if everything works out and you are extended an offer, let us walk through how this resignation process is going to happen and talk to the candidate about what prior practice has been, what they anticipate would happen, and if the candidate says, "Well, you know, I would like to hear what my current employer has to say and I may not necessarily want to leave." I really want to make sure that they understand when you resign, you are leaving on your terms. When you accept a counteroffer, you are staying but you may be replaced using the client's best avenues to get the right person. So they may say, "Tinamarie, we will be able to give you an extra \$12,000 a year for you to stay and will you please be able to do that?" Then you are thinking, "Gosh, that is wonderful. I am doing the same job. I am making an extra \$12,000." The client is thinking, "Gosh, you know, it may take us 90 days for us to replace Tinamarie, so it will probably cost us \$3,000 for us to actually keep her here until we can get the right person."

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We really want the candidate to understand, first of all, if they were worth that amount of money they should have been paid that all along, that you should not have to resign to be able to earn the prevailing wage for what your position would be. Secondly, if that person does end up staying and the client is not looking to replace that person, before long the client might think, "Well, gosh, I am paying Tinamarie \$12,000 more a year and I am not getting any difference in outcome. So how do we make up for that? Let us load more work on her. Let us make sure that she can do these extra tasks." Before you know it, then the candidate says, "Well, gosh, now I have double the workload that I had before and before I was feeling like I was overworked." So it can be a really difficult situation when candidates do accept counteroffers.

**Tinamarie:** That is great insight. Discuss it early. Be honest about it. Get it all out on the table in the beginning.

**Tom:** As I have mentioned, I have talked with a number of people throughout doing this executive search that we have been helping our clients with for a number of years. Fortunately we do not have candidates who have accepted counteroffers we have already coached them against counteroffers using a lot of the same methodology, but I have had other people who will call me in tears saying, "I cannot believe I ended up accepting a counteroffer and now it is just terrible. Can you help me? I am in a bad position." So it is just something that we like to make sure that the candidates are aware of going into it and the clients need to understand as well when they extend a counteroffer, then there could be that feeling that they are not able to trust that employee as well as they were in the past. So we just want to make sure it is a win-win for both the clients and the candidates so they can feel comfortable and have long-term employment with whoever they are working for.

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**Tinamarie:** That is great insight. We have gotten over the whole obstacle of counteroffers. Now we need to onboard this person. What is the most important activity a company can perform during this process short of actually having their computer and phone working?

**Tom:** Right. As I mentioned before, I think communicating what the process is to the candidate, setting deadlines, being knowledgeable of what the process is and moving it forward quickly. Really in looking at some of our Millennials and younger generations, instant gratification is the hallmark. It is what they have grown up around. So in working with those people and onboarding them, I think teams are very natural to them. They work well in teams. They expect to have a very organized orientation and job description with details of where they arrive, when they leave, what the dress code is going to be, what deadlines are. The younger generations tend to do well with tasks that are varied and plentiful. Assigning peers with that onboarding process and providing frequent feedback to make sure they know where the key areas are at the client's location, whether it be the corporate office or at the community, and having a sense of feeling and purpose and belongingness really helps cement that person in from day one to the first 2 weeks, the first 30 days, the first quarter, and following up with that person regularly is very important.

**Tinamarie:** It almost sounds like you are saying senior living is such an intimate industry and really is caring for other people. So you need to, as the employer, care for your employees because they can then care for your clients.

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**Tom:** Absolutely. We talk about the importance of people making a personal investment and the quality of lives that they affect. We have the employees doing that for their subordinates and the residents they care for in the community, but the employer also needs to have a personal investment in the employees. When we place a candidate, we follow up with them prior to their first day, making sure everything looks good, and they are going to show up as they are supposed to. We follow up with them at the end of their first week just to see if they had any questions.

*"We check in with them twice the first month just to, again, see if there are any questions, see if there is any additional resources we could provide or follow up with their hiring manager to assist with that process. Then we check in with them once a month for the first quarter, quarterly for the first year, and annually thereafter."*

We follow back up with our hiring manager and give them a very informal performance appraisal saying, "Hey, I just talked with Joe. They are really happy about this new opportunity. They said that they had a couple of questions about A, B, and C. They really like how you have been able to do X, Y, and Z." It really helps the client and the candidate interface well together for the long term.

**Tinamarie:** Wow, that is great. I do not want to take up too much more of your time, but I do have one last question. Social media is big. I mean all the Millennials are using some form of social media. Has that changed the landscape of recruiting in senior living?



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**Tom:** Well, I do not know if it is really changed the landscape that much. I think a lot of people were hoping that social media would be the "silver bullet" that will help a lot of people gain awareness and become interested in their opportunities, which I think to a degree it does help with engagement which can help drive the referrals, but there are a lot of limitations on social media that really, kind of what we were talking about earlier, can limit the quality of conversations that you have with potential candidates. For example, Twitter, you can only post 140 characters, and there are some special things you can post, like for example, the hashtag NAJ means "need a job." Some people may respond to that a little bit better. If I look at other avenues for social media, YouTube tends to be a good way to promote corporate culture, but it is not really the best way to attract applications. Pinterest and Instagram seem to do well with promoting pictures of the organization. We are seeing a little bit of traction on Google Plus which is more of a mashup between Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, but I have heard that tends to be more successful in technology areas as opposed to senior living.

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*"So we do a lot of people trying to maximize social media, which like I said can help with the engagement and drive referrals, but it is not going to be the one stop that will solve everyone's issues."*

**Tinamarie:** That is great insight. That is a great way to end this. In senior living it is still a very personal, human interaction, that social media is not going to be the cure all.

**Tom:** Exactly.

**Tinamarie:** Tom, thank you so much for spending this time with me. I really appreciate learning more about recruiting in the senior living space. It has been really, really inspiring to hear how it is still such a human touch that is needed, especially in such a caring type of industry. Thank you so much for enlightening me on all of this.

**Tom:** It has been my pleasure. Absolutely.

**Tinamarie:** I want to thank all of our listeners. I appreciate you spending the time with me and Tom. If you do have any questions, how can people get a hold of you Tom?



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**Tom:** Absolutely. If people are interested in talking a little bit further about talent acquisition or procurement for their organizations, I would be happy to offer a complimentary consultation. They could just be frustrated with the quality of talent that they are seeing or want some ideas how to attract some of the best people in the market today. They can give me a call. My phone number is (303) 683-7333 or they can email me. My email is

[TomZ@AspenCanHelp.com](mailto:TomZ@AspenCanHelp.com). Again, the phone number is (303) 683-7333 or [TomZ@AspenCanHelp.com](mailto:TomZ@AspenCanHelp.com), like we can help you. It will come right over to me. I think you guys are putting a link where they can access my calendar too. Is that right?

**Tinamarie:** Yes. We can absolutely put that on there for you. We will have that ready. Really, if you have questions or you just need some help with finding the best talent, Tom is uniquely qualified. He has been on both side of that desk, so please feel free to reach out to him. Again, thank you so much Tom for spending the time with me today.

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