

A Message to Hiring Committees –

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By Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick

A new hiring season is upon us, and it seems a good time to direct a column at hiring committees instead of candidates.

Over the years we've heard of many bad experiences with search committees, most occasioned by people who probably meant no harm. With a little forethought a search committee can avoid unnecessary wear and tear on candidates and on itself. A successful search should both yield a good candidate and leave a good impression on those who didn't get the job.

Let's assume that hirers are generally people of good will who want to conduct an efficient job search while doing everything reasonably possible to treat all candidates with respect. Here are a few guidelines we think hiring committees ought to follow.

Before You Advertise a Position

Take the time to clearly define the position. Once the job is advertised hundreds of candidates will spend thousands of hours applying. There will always be people who apply even though they meet none of the stated qualifications. Many, however, won't waste their time applying if the position description is written clearly enough for them to determine they are unsuitable. Do these reasonable people a favor by being as specific as possible. Don't say, without qualification, that you'll consider all areas of specialization when there's a particular one you hope to find. If you absolutely will not consider candidates without a Ph.D., say so. If what you really want is a superlative teacher, say so, rather than emphasizing research qualifications. This clarity helps you, too, because it will eliminate candidates whose materials you'll find merely burdensome to peruse.

Once you've defined what you want, be equally clear about what materials you want from applications. "Send credentials" has bewildered many a candidate since, as it turns out, "credentials" is not a term with a common meaning. When you ask for references, make clear whether you want names and contact information, or actual letters of recommendation. Students ask us all the time what "evidence of successful teaching" means. We applaud the open-endedness of such statements, but wish they were accompanied by some clarifying text, such as "send syllabi, examples of student work, student evaluations, or letters from colleagues attesting to your teaching ability."

If you decide to require transcripts, consider accepting unofficial versions at this stage and making that clear in your ad. Doing so will save candidates hundreds of dollars in transcript fees. The cost of job hunting can be considerable, as a recent article on this site details. You can always ask the finalists for official transcripts before you bring them to the campus.

Once the Job Ad Is Out

Most serious candidates will want to look at your departmental Web site before applying. Make sure yours is current, informative, and easy to use. Candidates will look at it to learn about the department's faculty and will be particularly interested in their areas of specialty. Many departments post faculty profiles and link to individual faculty Web sites. This is very helpful. Candidates will also want to know what courses you offer. Many will be interested in learning whether technology is an important part of teaching on your campus. Web sites with little information, dead links, and cumbersome maneuvering capabilities leave a negative impression and make it difficult for candidates to do the best possible job of presenting their qualifications in terms of your needs.

As applications come in, send each candidate a form postcard or an e-mail message to say you've received their materials. Mention when you hope to notify those selected for first-round interviews. This will save you time, by cutting down on the inquiries from candidates who want to know if their materials have arrived and when they might expect to hear something.

The Interview Stage

You may select candidates for a first round of telephone or conference interviews, or you may invite them directly to campus. Whatever the case, some of the same general principles apply. As you contact candidates, provide information about the interview. If these are first-stage interviews you may not know exactly who will be doing the interviewing, but share that information with candidates as soon as you do know it. Let candidates know how long the interview will last.

For campus interviews it is standard procedure to provide a written itinerary of the interview, which typically includes a job talk (a presentation of the candidate's dissertation research), group and individual interviews, meals and other social events, and anything else, such as teaching a class. The more a candidate knows to expect, the better he or she can prepare. Let candidates know whom to expect in the audience for a job talk. If they will be asked to teach a class, give them an idea of what students in the class will know by this stage of the course. Ask candidates what equipment they need for their presentations, and don't promise it unless you're sure you can provide it in good working order.

Finally, for campus-based interviews, make sure that candidates understand exactly how travel arrangements are to be made and reimbursed.

Before each candidate arrives for the interview, distribute copies of his or her written materials to interviewers. Make sure your fellow faculty members are clear on the kinds of questions that should be asked, as well as those that shouldn't.

Inappropriate questions form the basis of most of the campus-visit horror stories we've heard. To obey the law, interviewers should not ask candidates if they're married, pregnant, or plan to have children. They shouldn't be asked what their spouses or partners do, or how they'll handle

day-care arrangements. Similarly off-limits are questions about candidates' age or religion (with the exception of some religious institutions), or whether they speak a foreign language at home. Your campus personnel office will have materials on good and bad interview questions. Taking this advice will save you both from offending candidates and from possible lawsuits.

There are other questions that, while unlikely to get you in legal trouble, may leave a bad impression. Pressing candidates for details about rumors you've heard about their home department fall into this category, as well as fluff questions like "What is your philosophy of life?"

When candidates first arrive on campus, tell them immediately if the schedule has changed. When possible, have one person from the committee stay with the candidate throughout the day or days. If that's not possible, be sure the candidate knows where to go next after being "handed off."

Although most candidates are excited about the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and show how they are a good fit for your institution, the interview process is stressful because it involves so many different kinds of interactions with so many different people. If you are acting as a host, make sure there are breaks during the schedule. Offer candidates something to drink. If you are trying to follow a schedule, make every effort to stick to it so the candidate won't feel rushed. If your department's most long-winded colleague wants to take candidates aside to discuss his or her research or personal hopes for the new hire, be prepared to step in and keep the process from getting off schedule.

At the conclusion of the interview, give candidates as realistic a picture as you can of when they might expect to hear from you. For example: "You're the first of the three people we're inviting to campus, and we hope to have a decision by March 1." If your decision extends past the time you told candidates to expect word, get in touch with them to let them know the new time frame. A simple e-mail message can prevent someone from listening every day for a call when, realistically, no one will be offered the position for another month.

Finally, however much you love a candidate, never suggest to that person that the job is theirs until you are in a firm position to make an offer. Predictions made by over-enthusiastic members of search committees have caused many candidates tremendous disappointment when they find they will not be offered the job after all.

Making an Offer

When your committee makes its final decision and you contact your first choice to make the offer be sure to allow a few weeks for the candidate to make a decision. While you certainly want the person to accept your job on the spot, the likelihood is that he or she may have other offers to consider or have interest in places that haven't yet made their final decisions. It's hard to make such an important decision in only a few days. Instead, offer to provide any information that will help the finalist make the decision. Perhaps you need to review some of the specifics of the job. Maybe they want information on the geographic area, schools, or employment opportunities for a spouse or partner. Both providing the information and showing interest will

enhance the finalist's view of your institution, which, if you've handled the search well to this point, is probably positive.

Once you have an acceptance, please give the other candidates closure by letting them know a decision has been made. A form letter or an e-mail message for those who never visited the campus is fine, but people who have come to campus deserve either a personalized letter or a telephone call, hard as it may be to deliver disappointing news.