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Search Committees

The most important part of your job . . . really!

By Carissa J. Vogel



???

job description

evaluate

question

applicants

prepare

interview

organize

Need convincing that work on a search committee may be one of the most important parts of your job? You could spend 40 hours of your waking life for many years with a new hire. You will be discussing hard issues and handling the aftermath of difficult choices. With the selection of a new colleague, the dynamics and culture of your workplace could be reinforced or completely changed. These thoughts may inspire fear or excitement. No matter what your emotion is when you get the chance to serve on a search committee, you will see that your work on the committee, due to the future consequences of your choice, deserves priority treatment. The following article outlines issues and questions to consider in your service as a member of a search committee.

Begin at the Beginning— The Job Description

When a position becomes vacant and the decision is made to fill the open position, the first step usually involves tracking down the old job description, no matter how long the previous occupant held the position. Now, most people would rather have a hot spike put through their eyeball than rewrite a job description. But, sharp objects aside, this fundamental step should not be overlooked. Instead, look at the reevaluation for what it is: a chance to assess what your library has been doing and to imagine what your library could do. While the committee or the head of the library might decide a big change is unnecessary, the exercise of asking basic questions about services and workflows frequently leads to discovery and new ideas.

In your excitement of writing the position description that perfectly captures the attributes of your prospective colleague, beware the unicorn (the mythical creature that will evade your search because it does not exist). Unicorn job descriptions usually fall into one of two categories: an impossible list of skills or an impossible list of duties. To avoid the skills unicorn, ask whether you know at least one person with the set of skills and experiences listed in the new job description. Avoiding the duties unicorn can be more difficult because hiring a new person can be seen as an opportunity for colleagues to jettison unwanted responsibilities. The best question to pose is whether or not you could complete all the duties required to be successful. During your annual review, would you feel comfortable being accountable for all of the duties? If not, a reassessment of the needs listed for the position will be necessary.

Assessing Candidates— What Could Go Right

Imagine: The perfect job description has been posted, and applications with long resumes, detailed cover letters, and impressive references start appearing in a seemingly endless flow. A stack of applications representing qualified candidates sits before you, and you get out the red pen and start reading from the top of each resume, looking to see whom you can immediately shift into the “no” pile. Let’s stop here. This approach has been taken by many search committee members and works to limit the many choices down to an acceptable, easily digestible number. However, other approaches exist. In his book *The Rare Find*, George Anders discusses how reading a resume “upside down” can tell a more complete story of a candidate and how analyzing a “jagged resume” can lead to discovering outstanding contributors. His book describes how people from different fields rethink the evaluation process to find talent that might not be obvious to others in order to build better organizations.

To Skype or not to Skype, that is NOT the question.

A 30- to 45-minute phone or Skype interview is always a good use of time. If your library allows for the time, try to talk to as many people as possible from your “yes” and “maybe” piles. Again, think about what could go right. Some great candidates do not sparkle on paper. (However, be prepared to address technological issues and have a backup plan if you need to switch to a conference call or other option.)

No one in Anders’ book approaches candidate evaluation from the “no” pile perspective. Instead, candidates are evaluated and considered from a more positive, holistic angle. What could go right might be the difference in finding an outstanding colleague versus a mediocre one. The extra minutes you spend carefully reading each application should be viewed as an investment in your library.

Questions, Questions, Questions

When you interviewed for your current job, how many times were you asked . . . and by how many people . . . about your five-year plan and why you applied for the position? No matter how much time you and your colleagues spend with a candidate, you will not have enough time to ask all the questions you should

be asking. Do not waste your time or theirs. (They have a list of questions, too!) You can suggest circulating questions and assigning certain set questions to different people involved in the search.

As you and the committee prepare the questions for a short, preliminary interview, consider the following:

- What are you evaluating?
- What are the essential qualities you want to see to help you decide to issue an invitation to an onsite interview?
- Do the questions require answers that warrant more than a regurgitation of the candidate’s written application?
- Is there a big hole or a question you need to have explained?

The questions you prepare for the onsite interview will build from these elements. In addition to the basic competency a successful candidate needs to demonstrate, your questions should help you obtain this type of information:

- Does the candidate understand the core elements of the position?
- Can he or she articulate this knowledge?
- Do you have a strong sense of the candidate’s personality and thinking process?
- Beyond liking the candidate, do you think he or she is right for this particular job at your library?

At every point in the process of developing questions, talk to the other members of the search committee about what they are looking for in a successful candidate and how they are approaching their own evaluation. You might be surprised at the array of perspectives.

Organizing the Interview Day

The basic structure of the interview day (or days) should not be overlooked in the interview process. As a word of caution, the structure of the day, such as who meets with the candidate and for how long, can be quite political. Feel free to offer suggestions, but understand if the chair of the search committee cannot act on all of them.

If required in the interview, the presentation topic is often the most debated and discussed part of the interview day. The stakes are high because this is the most high-profile part of the onsite interview and is often the only session that everyone who gives feedback will have in common. Search committee fatigue starts setting in around this point in the process, which makes the pressure to craft a good

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Make feedback easy to collect by creating a survey.

- If your organization does not have its own system, services like SurveyMonkey are a low-skill way to build a survey and collect the data you need.
- Circulate the survey before your first candidate comes in so everyone can see the things you are interested in having them evaluate, and ask everyone to include their names when giving feedback.
- As the interview draws near, send reminders and set a deadline for getting the feedback. At least one member of the search committee should monitor the progress and reach out if colleagues have not given feedback, especially if the new position will work directly with said colleagues.
- All members of the search committee should complete the survey. Getting written feedback will prevent a good talker from changing other members' opinions.

topic that much more difficult. If you understand what you need to learn from the presentation, it can be easier to develop a good topic.

If the job primarily requires the candidate to train or to teach law students or newly minted lawyers, the topic should require teaching something and, more than likely, should be very specific. Your evaluation will be based on whether or not the candidate can clearly present information in an organized, easy-to-follow manner. In contrast, if the position will require many different kinds of presentations to varied audiences, it is more important to understand how the candidate approaches a general topic.

No matter the topic, you should not plan to sit by and passively observe the presentation. During the

presentation, write at least two questions you can ask the candidate. You will want to think about what you want to ask, when you want to ask it, and how you plan to ask your question. For example, if the candidate will be teaching first-year law students, during the presentation (not waiting for the question and answer period) you might want to ask a question about something the candidate already covered. You can learn a lot about a person's teaching ability by interrupting their rhythm. Though this may not seem polite, you are evaluating the candidate's abilities. This might be as "real world" as possible during the interview process. Remember, you need as much information as you can get to make a good decision in the end.

Picking the Winner

Once you have interviewed the last candidate, the most important part of your job is ahead of you. At this point, it will be a matter of bringing all the information together, from feedback to reference checks. Before the final meeting of the search committee, carefully read through all of the written feedback. The final discussion about who to hire can be lively, so good preparation is key. Though every new hire is a gamble, the payoff of a great, long-term colleague is huge. Good luck hitting the jackpot! ■



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No opportunity to be a part of a search committee at your job? Volunteer in your community. Nonprofit organizations frequently need help interviewing candidates. The skills you build during any interview process will be fully transferrable.