

Common Hiring Mistakes

Tips on How to Avoid Them

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Whether you're filling a vacancy due to a long-planned retirement or urgently trying to fill a just-terminated position critical to your organization, hiring can be tricky. This article highlights some common mistakes and missteps in hiring, and how you can best avoid them.

1. Use Hiring As a Strategic Opportunity

Any time an employee leaves the library for *any* reason is an excellent opportunity to revisit and reevaluate the needs, goals and strategic direction of the department and the library. Here's a chance to bring in new talent and new ideas. Create a "wish list" of ways a new person can move the library's strategic plan forward and what skills, abilities and behaviors are needed in this person to accomplish the goals.

2. Have Strong Job Descriptions

An up-to-date job description is critical in identifying both the duties and responsibilities of the position as well as the knowledge, skills and abilities the incumbent must possess to successfully perform the job. The period immediately before recruitment is a perfect time to make sure the job description is accurate, current and aligned with the library's strategic direction. Use the updated information to help narrow your search and recruit effectively as well as to let job candidates know what will be expected of them if hired. The job description ensures that the library and the new hire have the same expectations for the job.

3. As Much as Possible, Take Your Time

We all know that recruiting is rarely a leisurely process. Nearly every job opening is accompanied by a department manager who would like the position filled yesterday, with minimal downtime. Hiring too quickly or hiring the first candidate you find could backfire. Conducting a thorough search for the library should include posting the position internally, encouraging employee referrals, advertising the position in a newspaper, library journal, or publication and on the Internet, and possibly using a recruiting service. When your library uses a variety of recruiting methods you are more likely to find pool of qualified candidates to choose from than if using only one method. If you hire too quickly you could find yourself in this same situation in the very near future—with another vacancy, more anxiety and no clear idea of what went wrong. With a strong job description and clear expectations in place, the most effective recruiting methods can be used in a timely manner. After performing a thorough search and interview process, even if it takes a little longer than desired; the most qualified candidate possible will be hired for the position.

4. Use Appropriate and Effective Interview Questions

It's easy to fall into the trap of using inappropriate or even illegal interview questions. Some examples of inappropriate and ineffective interview questions are:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Do you plan to have family in the near future?
- Are you disabled in any way?

Instead of the above questions, ask questions such as:

- Describe your professional experience that relates to this job.
- Are you able to perform the essential functions of the job with a reasonable accommodation?

Using the first set of interview questions are at best a waste of time and at worst the opening to potential legal issues. Once you've got your interview questions identified, ask the same set of questions in the same order to all interviewed candidates. This ensures a fair process for all candidates and allows you to compare all candidates equally. Elaborating on certain questions with various candidates to gather more information is appropriate. Be sure to avoid illegal questions such as questions about the candidate's personal background, family status, age, etc. For more detailed information on interview questions consult a Human Resources professional or attorney.

5. Avoid Bias

Interviewers must take precautions to ensure that their own personal preconceptions do not color their judgment. Typically, the interviewer does not even realize that they are acting on biases. Some common biases in hiring are:

- **Stereotyping:** For instance, assuming all women prefer administrative duties and only men like blue-collar duties.
- **First-impression error:** Letting your first impression of the candidate get in the way of really listening to the candidate during the interview.
- **Negative emphasis:** Allowing one negative quality of the candidate to overshadow the good qualities.
- **Halo Effect:** Making a decision on a candidate based on one outstanding quality.
- **Cultural noise:** This occurs when the candidate answers the questions with what they think you want to hear instead of with what they believe to be the answer, and doesn't give you a true picture of the candidate.
- **Nonverbal bias:** Allowing a candidate's appearance or mannerisms to influence your decision.
- **Contrast effect:** When a candidate seems extremely qualified simply because they were interviewed after a weak candidate.
- **Hiring someone like "you":** Using yourself as a benchmark in perceiving others.

6. Give the Candidate a True Picture of the Company

Hiring managers expect that well-prepared candidates have gathered some information on the library before the interview. Even if the candidate has done their homework, they still need to know the goals and culture of the library. One way to accomplish this is to give an informative tour of the building and introduce the candidate to some key employees. It is not in any organization's best interests to deceive a candidate by giving a false impression of the company and the work culture. For instance, don't tell a candidate that work hours are "flexible" if managers expect all employees to start promptly at 7:45 each morning and work every other Saturday. If a candidate accepts a position based in part on false assumptions, it is highly unlikely that once hired the employee will be satisfied and in fact, may feel deceived by the company. Ultimately this person will begin the job hunt again and leave with an unfavorable impression of the library.

7. Make Hiring Decisions in a Reasonable Time Frame

When the library drags its feet during the hiring process it is a lose-lose situation. Although it is very important to make sure you thoroughly recruit, select, interview, and perform background checks (which can add significant time to the process), it is critical to stay in contact with candidates and make them aware of the timeline of your hiring process. If this process is too long you could lose a candidate to another organization and/or make an unfavorable impression on the candidate. Communication is key since candidates will form an opinion of the library—good or bad—throughout this process, and they will most certainly tell someone—friends, family, co-workers, etc. It is also important to contact candidates who were not chosen for the job in a timely manner—you may want to contact them in the future as they may be suited for a subsequent job opening.

8. Do Thorough Background Checks

Yes, it can be difficult to gather adequate reference information, since many organizations only offer dates of employment and position title for former employees. In addition, specific industries like banking and specific positions such as drivers require that certain background checks be performed. These include drug testing, credit checks, driving record checks, etc. When any background checks are performed the candidate must sign a release to give permission for the checks to be performed. There are a number of companies who will perform this service for you for a reasonable fee.

9. Set an Appropriate Pay Rate/Range for the Position

Paying too little (and even too much!) can eventually cause problems with the employee and within the library. If a qualified candidate agrees to a salary that is below their original expectations because they “need” the job, they will most likely keep looking for another job that eventually matches their salary requirements. Of course, pay ranges should be set to reflect the internal equity of the organization as well as to be competitive with market rates. Be honest with candidates about the pay rate and pay ranges set by the library. Never promise a raise to a new employee after a certain time period! The employee should know what is involved in the probationary period, when their performance will be reviewed, when they will be eligible for a salary increase and what the potential salary increase could be. On the other hand, paying a new employee too much relative to established internal equity to get them “in the door” can offend current employees. Although employees are not encouraged to share salary information, it eventually becomes revealed to other employees one way or another.

The hiring errors described above are often made innocently and unintentionally, but can still cost your organization time and money in the long run. Remember that each new employee can be a crucial part of the strategic plan to better the company if recruited successfully.

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