AC 2009-978: DO'S AND DON'TS FOR RECRUITING ENGINEERING OR TECHNOLOGY FACULTY

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Do's and Don'ts for Recruiting Engineering or Technology Faculty

Abstract

Recruiting new engineering or technology faculty is a time and resource intensive process. Frequently, a faculty search takes the back burner to more immediate concerns, resulting in an unsuccessful recruiting effort. This paper outlines suggestions for organizing and improving the recruiting process to enhance the likelihood of a successful search. A typical engineering or technology faculty search process is examined. The steps considered are: search committee formation, timeline development, position description, position announcement, initial screening, telephone interviews, campus visit, and position offer. Suggestions are presented to improve each step in this process. Common mistakes encountered at each phase in the recruiting process are also identified and discussed. Applying these suggestions and avoiding common errors will improve the recruiting process, making it a more positive experience for both the institution and candidates.

Introduction

The process of recruiting new engineering or technology faculty is time and resource intensive. It has been suggested that the value of resources spent to recruit a new faculty member approaches their first year salary[1]. A factor complicating the recruiting process is that most practitioners have had little formal training or guidance and may have limited experience as well. Some large universities have developed comprehensive recruiting toolkits which go well beyond the guidelines established by the human resources departments at most institutions. Several of these toolkits are listed in the bibliography.

There are three keys to successful faculty recruiting. A department, through its search committee, articulates what it is looking for in a candidate and the timeline for finding this candidate. Members of the search committee must accept and embrace the responsibility of executing all aspects of the search process thoroughly and according to the timeline. Finally, it must be remembered that both the department and the candidates are on a search. Every contact with the candidates should leave a positive and professional impression.

Underlying this faculty recruiting process is the implicit commitment and support of the institution for funding and filling this position. It is difficult to have a successful faculty search without this institutional commitment. Therefore, the faculty search process should not begin until this commitment has been assured.

This paper examines the typical engineering or technology faculty recruiting process and identifies ways to make the process more successful. The faculty recruiting steps examined in this paper apply to recruiting faculty for traditional classroom roles as opposed to a distance learning environment. These recruiting steps are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Typical Engineering or Technology Faculty Recruiting Steps
1. Search Committee Formation
2. Timeline Development
3. Position Description
4. Position Announcement
5. Initial Screening
6. Telephone Interviews
7. Campus Visit
8. Position Offer

These recruiting steps are fairly typical for baccalaureate engineering and technology institutions and may be applicable to other types of institutions as well. Each of these steps will be examined in further detail. Some faculty recruiting hints and tips to improve the recruiting process are provided in Table 2 at the end of this paper.

Search Committee Formation

A search committee has tremendous influence on the success of a search. It also shapes the future direction of a department due to a new faculty member's personality, abilities, and interests. This section describes the composition and responsibilities of a search committee.

The composition of a search committee should reflect the widest range of department interests and experience. At the same time, the committee should be small enough to work together effectively. Ideally, a faculty search committee should consist of 3-6 members that are a representative sampling of the department as a whole[2]. The larger the committee, the more difficult it becomes in arranging common times to meet. It is important to strike a balance such that the search committee is “small” enough to represent as many interests as possible. Members should also have a shared vision of departmental goals and an understanding of how the particular position meshes with those goals. Additional committee members from other areas may be required depending upon an institution's recruiting guidelines and policies.

The search committee is responsible for developing a position description and screening criteria used to evaluate candidates applying for the position. Committee members will need to determine the relative importance of each qualification and its value as a predictor of future performance.

Membership on a search committee is a serious responsibility. Members should be able to participate in all activities at each phase of the recruiting process to fairly evaluate each candidate. Search committee members, and especially the committee chair, play a very important role. On one hand, they represent the department and institution to the candidate and function as ambassadors. Frequently they are the only contact that a candidate has with the institution. It is important that communications with candidates be handled in a prompt and professional manner. On the other hand, search committee members have a great influence in screening and selecting candidates, thus dictating the future direction of the department.

Timeline Development

Searches which do not move forward in a timely and organized fashion can have a negative effect on the search committee and candidate[3]. Therefore, it is essential that the search process be organized with timelines that are honored. A first priority of the search committee should be the development of a realistic timeline by working backward from the expected position start date[4]. Ideally, the position announcement should be publicized 7-9 months in advance of the anticipated start date in order attract as large a pool of candidates as possible. This means advertising in the October-December timeframe for a mid-August to mid-September start date. Intermediate milestones should also be established for other steps in the process such as application closure, screening date, campus visit, and hiring recommendation.

Position Description

The position description serves as a guide for the search committee's recruiting activities. It is an important tool to permit the department to determine what is desired in a candidate and how to meet those expectations. The description should also provide candidate evaluation guidelines and facilitate development of candidate rubrics or evaluation metrics for screening and ranking purposes.

The position description should contain the following information:

- Title and rank
- Appointment type (non-tenured or tenure-track, 9-month or 12-month)
- Responsibilities and duties
- Required education and qualifications
- Preferred education and qualifications
- Application materials
- Application deadline
- Additional items to satisfy federal, state, or institutional requirements

The position description should be specific enough to meet departmental needs while also broad enough to appeal to the widest pool of candidates. Focusing too narrowly on subfields or specializations may needlessly limit the pool of candidates. The description should also provide enough information to allow self-selection amongst potential candidates to screen themselves from the pool if they do not meet the required position qualifications.

The required application materials should be the essentials to screen a candidate. Requiring current written letters of recommendation from 3-5 references or original transcripts of all degrees may be unduly burdensome and limit the pool of candidates. These items can be requested and evaluated at a later stage if the candidate is a finalist.

The application deadline should be at least 30 days after the publication date of any advertising to allow interested candidates adequate time to apply. This also helps to broaden the pool of candidates.

There are other items that should be included in the position description to fulfill federal, state, and institutional requirements. Usually a template or outline of this information is available from the hiring institution's human resources office.

Position Announcement

Releasing a position description to the public starts the recruiting process. In order to reach the widest pool of potential candidates, the position should be advertised both passively and actively.

Passive advertising consists of placing the announcement in the appropriate media such as the institution web site, The Chronicle of Higher Education, HigherEdJobs.com, and professional journals. Advertising in local or regional newspapers and trade publications may be useful for vocationally-oriented faculty positions. The position application deadline should be at least 30 days after the media publication date. Published position announcements should be reviewed in print or online to verify that all information is correct.

Active advertising involves personal outreach by departmental members to colleagues attending conferences, working at other institutions or industry, and through professional societies making them aware of the available position. By combining active and passive advertising methods, a wider pool of qualified candidates can be attracted.

Initial Screening

The selection process will likely involve three levels of screening. Essential to this process is the development of screening criteria used to evaluate the candidates in a consistent manner to determine if they meet the minimum position requirements. The screening methodology should be in place before evaluating any candidates. The goal of the initial screening process is to eliminate candidates that do not meet the minimum qualifications and gather additional information about those that do. Candidates not meeting the minimum qualifications should be promptly notified that they are no longer under consideration for the position. Telephone interviews may be used to gather information about the remaining candidates and refine the pool to a short list of candidates to be invited for a campus interview.

Telephone Interviews

Prior to scheduling telephone interviews, the search committee should determine the format for the interview as well as develop the questions and a time limit. A thirty minute telephone interview is usually adequate to gather the necessary information. Any teleconferencing equipment to be used for the interview should be checked for proper usage and operation. A member of the search committee should contact the candidate to schedule a convenient time for a telephone interview. This call is also a good opportunity to verify the correct pronunciation of the candidate's name for future contacts.

Frequently, a candidate is not able to clearly hear the search committee grouped around a speakerphone as well as they can hear him or her due to room acoustics. It is very helpful for the candidate to have a list of telephone interview team members and their affiliations prior to the telephone interview. This will allow the candidate to place each individual in context. It is also helpful for committee members to announce their name before posing a question to the candidate. When the telephone interview has concluded, completely terminate the conference call before holding any discussion.

The telephone interview should have the following elements:

- Introduction of all members present
- Description of the interview format
- Questions to clarify candidate's application materials (if necessary)
- Previously developed position-related questions
- Questions to determine candidate's non-technical contribution to the campus community
- Questions to determine candidate's interest in position
- Reasons why candidate is interested in leaving current employer
- Opportunity for candidate to ask questions of committee
- Explain next step in the recruiting process including anticipated timeline
- Thank candidate

After evaluating results of the telephone interviews, a short list of candidates to be invited for campus interviews should be developed. References for the short listed candidates should be checked at this point to verify prior employment history, confirm candidate strengths and weaknesses, and to obtain an employment recommendation. A set of questions should be developed by the search committee in advance with the goals of gathering necessary information and encouraging the referee to elaborate on the candidate's qualities.

Campus Visit

The campus interview is probably the most important part of the faculty recruiting process since it is typically the first time that the search committee and candidate meet face to face. It may also be the first time that the candidate has visited the campus and community. The main purpose of the visit is to determine if the candidate is the right person for the position. It is important to keep in mind that this is a two way street and the candidates are also evaluating the position, department, institution and community. Therefore, both parties should strive to make the best possible impression. An interview that is well planned, on time, allows the candidate to demonstrate his or her abilities, and provides the necessary position-related information is a major element in a successful search.

When contacting the candidate to extend a campus interview invitation, the following items should be discussed:

- How interview travel expenses will be reimbursed
- Whether travel arrangements will be responsibility of candidate or host institution
- Scheduling a convenient time
- Describe the interview format

Prior to the visit, an information packet should be sent to the candidate containing information such as:

- Institution and department information
- Campus map with all interview destinations marked
- Community information
- Vehicle parking information, maps or pass

Before the visit, one member of the search committee should be designated as a host to guide the candidate and answer any questions that might come up regarding logistics of the visit or community. The host should explain the interview activities. If the candidate is touring by foot, the host should describe the campus topography, especially if it is not suitable for typical business attire. If the candidate will be driving, the host should provide parking information. The goal is to give the candidate a clear set of expectations.

A typical interview will involve meetings with the search committee, dean, human resources personnel, and other individuals. The visit should be arranged to create a positive impression. Indifferent or insensitive faculty should not have prominent roles in the visit. Time should be allotted for short breaks, presentation setup time, and tours of the department facilities and the campus. There should not be long periods of dead time in which the candidate is unescorted and killing time between meetings. This conveys the impression that the candidate is not important or being considered seriously.

An important aspect of the campus visit is an interview with the search committee. As in the case of telephone interviews, a list of questions should be developed in advance by the search committee. The questions should focus on teaching, research, service, and other areas deemed important to the search committee. A set of useful sample interview questions is contained in the University of Florida recruiting toolkit[5].

The candidate will usually give a teaching or research presentation which allows the search committee to judge the teaching ability of the candidate. This presentation also gives students and other faculty members an opportunity to evaluate the candidate. It is advisable to have a good turnout for these presentation events by encouraging attendance or giving them as part of a class. A poor turnout can give a candidate the impression that the interview is not being taken seriously. The search committee members should be interested and attentive during the presentation. Nothing telegraphs disinterest in a candidate more than having the search committee chair fall asleep during a candidate's presentation while sitting in the front row of the audience. If the presentation is not impressive, be courteous but do not give positive feedback. If the presentation demonstrates that the candidate is not viable, be sure to stay involved during the remainder of the visit. Candidates frequently can tell when they are not being seriously evaluated and may conclude that the interview is a sham[6].

At the conclusion of the interview, the search committee should address any unanswered questions and give the candidate an opportunity to ask questions that may have arisen during the visit. Describe the next step in the recruiting process and the timeline for filling the position. This is also a good time to review interview expense reimbursement issues.

Position Offer

After a finalist or finalists have been recommended to the hiring authority, the search committee should follow up to be sure that the hiring process is moving forward and that the hiring authority has all information needed to make a decision. Prior to making an offer, the search committee or department chair should determine a reasonable period for the candidate to consider the offer. Too short a period can lead to a hasty acceptance which is later withdrawn. Too long a period can unduly delay the search. A period of 1-2 weeks, depending upon circumstances, is generally reasonable.

The offer should include all of the information necessary for a candidate to make an informed decision. This information should include salary, appointment type and term, rank, tenure status, benefits, relocation assistance, and startup research or equipment funds. Some of these items may be negotiable. An offer can be made more attractive by being flexible in the types of compensation offered to the candidate. Some authorities advise identifying to the candidate specific items which are flexible or negotiable[7]. This discussion is also a good time to identify the items most important to the candidate. The benefit of this approach is that it empowers a candidate to tailor an offer to make it more competitive. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that the candidate will accept the position. This approach also helps equalize negotiating skills across different genders, cultural backgrounds, and experience levels.

The manner in which an offer is presented and negotiated affects the immediate success of the recruiting process and the retention of a new hire. These offer negotiations should be handled in an open and honest manner. This results in new faculty members that are more satisfied with their positions and their administrative chain of command. The way in which a department fulfills commitments made during negotiations is also critical to retaining newly hired faculty.

Once a candidate has accepted an offer, the unsuccessful candidates should be promptly notified that the search has been concluded. The focus should shift now from recruiting to retention. Beginning as a new faculty member is laden with many challenges. The search committee and department should work together to ease the candidate's transition into a first or new faculty position.

At any stage in the recruiting process, if funding for the position has been withdrawn by the institution due to budget shortfalls or reallocation of resource priorities, candidates should be promptly notified. The reason for the position cancellation should also be explained when notifying candidates. This communication sets the stage for contacting promising candidates if the position should reopen in the future.

Summary

Recruiting new engineering or technology faculty is a resource intensive process. The success of this recruiting process is critical to the long-term effectiveness of an institution. Underlying the success of this process is a commitment from the administrative chain of command to funding and filling the position.

Unfortunately, few search committee members have had formal training in faculty recruiting. In an effort to fill this gap, a number of institutions have created faculty recruiting toolkits. Several of these toolkits are cited in this paper. The general recruitment search process for engineering and technology faculty has been outlined. Throughout this process, some practical do's and don'ts have been identified to improve the likelihood of a successful faculty search. These suggestions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Engineering or Technology Faculty Recruiting Do's and Don'ts

Do's	Don'ts
Committed, responsible and diverse search committee	Distracted, disorganized, or large committee that impairs search
Create and honor a realistic search timeline	Rush a search to fill an opening or begin search late in the academic year
Develop a position description that meets departmental needs and attracts a broad candidate pool	Focus position description on narrow specializations or specific training
Use active outreach to attract candidates	Advertise position without checking for errors
Thoroughly check references	Require transcript originals or written letters of recommendation for initial screening
Provide candidate list of members prior to the telephone interview	Use a room or handset with poor acoustics in a telephone interview.
Have a system to analyze applications	Compare applications to each other
Provide department, campus, and community information, maps, parking pass before campus visit	Provide candidate with residence hall or dormitory lodging for campus visit
Be prepared, attentive and organized during campus visit	Permit indifferent or insensitive faculty to be prominent in the campus visit
Provide a firm agenda for campus visit and designate a host to assist the candidate with format and expectations	Allow large blocks of unescorted dead time between meetings during campus visit
Communicate search status with candidates in a professional and timely manner	Fail to return promised calls or unilaterally "drop" candidates deemed not viable
Allow candidate a reasonable timeframe to consider offer	Verbally promise position offer without timely confirmation from the hiring authority

In order for a search to be successful, a department must have a vision of the position, a realistic timeline for filling that position, and an organized method of accomplishing this. Interactions with the candidate should be handled in a positive and professional manner. Civility, consistency, and common sense should be woven throughout the recruiting process[8].

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