

DOES HIRING NEED TO BE A CRAPSHOOT?

Dr. Warren R. Hill
Weber State University

Abstract

The hiring decision is probably one of the most critical decisions we make in higher education. This is true whether we are hiring faculty or staff. A wrong hire can create problems that can ripple far beyond the hiring unit while a good hire can do wonders for a program. This paper discusses the hiring process and what we can do as faculty and administrators to help assure that the people we bring into our institutions are going to help us become better. Included are ways to increase the size of the applicant pool, how to reach minorities and women, how to evaluate the applications you receive, how to conduct your interviews, and how to do reference checking. Finally, there is an overview of what you should be looking for in the final selection process.

Introduction

There are two very critical times in the employment relationship between a faculty member and his or her institution, the time of hire and the time of granting tenure. As Gmelch and Miskin put it, "No other decision your department will make will be as important as the selection of a faculty colleague."¹ Another important point about the hiring process is that "Despite significant expenditure of human and economic capital, most academics have received no formal training on how to conduct a faculty search."² This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many departments typically conduct searches very infrequently and thus lack experience in doing searches. Because administrators tend to have more experience with hires, the administrator's role becomes critical in the hiring process.

The question that this paper seeks to address is how to reduce the uncertainty in this very critical process. There are several important steps in the hiring process, which if done well, should reduce the uncertainty and help to find the best candidate for a particular position. This paper will review each of these steps and look at some of the elements of these steps that can be applied in any hiring circumstance. These include the position description, advertising, the initial screening process, the interview, reference checking, and the final offer. The basic elements of each of these steps will be reviewed and outlined and are based upon the processes used at my institution and upon my personal experiences.

Defining the Position

There are a number of factors that need to be taken into account when the position description is written. These include such things as whether this is a tenure track or non-tenure track position, what specific expertise is being sought, and what kind of experience is desired. Experience could include both teaching and employment experiences. For a faculty position, normally the level and types of degrees are also important factors.

One approach that has been suggested for doing the position description is to start with the characteristics that are going to be evaluated in both the paper screen and during the interview and use these to describe the position. For example, good communication skills, both written and oral, are often considered important and thus will be part of the evaluation process. If so, then such skills should be included in the position description.

When the search and screen committee is formed, frequently their first task is to write the position description. However, some things should be said about how such committees are formed and what their duties and responsibilities are. Depending upon the size of the hiring entity, whether it be a department, division, or college, the committee may consist of the whole department or just a subset. If it is a subset, then the committee needs to realize that they are representing the larger group and should make certain that they do so in a responsible manner. It is critical to impress upon this group that time is critical and that in order to attract the widest possible pool of candidates it is important to advertise the position during the peak hiring period.

It is sometimes useful to have a faculty member from outside the group serve on the committee to provide a broader viewpoint, particularly if this position serves entities outside the hiring group such as teaching service courses. For ABET accredited programs or other programs with advisory committees, it is frequently useful to include someone from these committees. Expectations regarding serving on the committee should be made clear upfront so such outsiders are clear on the time commitment. It is also sometimes suggested that a student be part of a search and screen committee³ but I have not found them to be particularly insightful and they do not have a vested interest as do the other members of the hiring unit.

Getting the Word Out

Once the committee is clear on the qualifications they are seeking in a candidate, the next step is to try and get the word out to as many people as possible who might have an interest in the position. For higher level management positions such as dean or above, it is sometimes very helpful to make use of a search firm who can do everything from providing an initial list of candidates to conducting initial interviews.

In order to attract the broadest group of candidates possible, where you advertise is critical. Sometimes the ability to advertise widely is limited by one's budget so in such cases, it is even more important to find the appropriate venues for your announcement. There are now a number of excellent places to advertise online that are relatively inexpensive. The appropriate place is also critical when taking affirmative action issues into consideration. Your affirmative action officer should be able to help in this effort.

Word of mouth is also critical and so you need to have people who can spread the word for you. Your advisory committee, alumni, donors, and other contacts can be useful in this process. I strongly recommend that once the cutoff date or the start of screening date is reached, that all applicants be sent a letter. This letter should acknowledge receipt of their application and outline a rough timetable for the remainder of the hiring process.

The Paper Screen

This is a critical part of the search process as it is through the paper screen that the finalists for interviews are selected. My institution uses a rating sheet for this process where the criteria that can be assessed from the documents submitted by the candidate are rated. Each criterion is given a weighting that is agreed upon by the committee before reviewing any of the applications. Then when the applications are reviewed, each committee member rates each of the applicants separately for each criterion on a scale of one to five, with one being low and five being high. The rating is then multiplied by the weighting for each candidate and a total score is determined for each candidate for each reviewer. These scores are then added together to get a total score for each candidate for the committee as a whole. The rating sheet used by my institution is shown in Figure 1.

It is important when developing the criteria for the paper screen that they be related to the elements of the position description that are in the advertisement. Sometimes the ad will be relatively short referring prospective candidates to a web site where the full text description can be found. In either event, the criteria must reflect what is in the description but can include other factors the committee considers valid. The other important consideration is that the criteria be described in such a way that the reader can make an objective judgment on how they should be rated.

If affirmative action concerns are important in the hire, points can be added to the paper screen for either gender or ethnicity or both. These would then add to the totals calculated as per the above process. In any case, it is important for the committee to discuss the completed ratings before deciding on the finalists as various factors are sometimes overlooked or treated differently by different people.

Reference Checking

It is strongly suggested that you check references before inviting candidates to come in for interviews. Reference checking at this point in the search has the potential to save both the candidate and the institution time and possible embarrassment. I strongly suggest that you not bother with letters of recommendation but ask instead for the names and daytime telephone numbers of no less than three references. You also need to ask the candidates if you can contact other people as references that they have not listed in their application. Sometimes other references can arise from different sources where such secondary references can provide valuable information.

Before contacting references, the committee should agree ahead of time what questions they would like to ask. These questions should then be put onto a form with space for people to write down the answers. This also allows several different people to make the reference checks with some degree of consistency and spreads out the workload. "Is there any reason you feel that we should not hire this candidate?" is one question I always like to ask references.

As is the case throughout the search process but particularly in the case of references, confidentiality must be maintained. It is very important to impress this point upon both the committee members and anyone else involved with the search.

The Interview

It is hoped that the applicant pool is large enough that at least three viable candidates are available for interviews. Depending on the strength of the pool, if you are not satisfied after interviewing the first three candidates, you can then move down in the pool for one or more additional interviews. I feel that more than five candidates at one time becomes unwieldy and probably counterproductive.

The interview is critical as this is where you and the candidate get to meet each other face-to-face, frequently for the first time. It is important to remember that not only is the candidate attempting to put his or her best foot forward, you are also trying to present the institution in its best light. Thus, there is some selling occurring on both sides.

While the format of the interview process can take on many forms, there are several elements that are fairly common for faculty interviews. These are a sample presentation, a meeting with the search and screen committee, separate meetings with the department chair and the dean, and some kind of social function such as a lunch or dinner. If the candidate would need to relocate in order to accept the position, frequently a meeting with a local realtor is also included.

It is suggested that the sample presentation be in an area that is of importance to the department and deals either with a subject area that would be taught or an area of research that the applicant would be working in should he take the position. This is the place where student input can be very valuable. I feel that having an evaluation sheet for the students and the other attendees to use to help evaluate the presentation again adds consistency to the process.

It is also suggested that you have an evaluation sheet similar to the one used for the paper screen that includes those criteria that can only be determined from the interview. This could include such factors as good speaking ability in English, good knowledge of the subject matter that he or she would be teaching, and the ability to relate well to people. You can also include those factors where you want additional information that can be gained through the interview process such as the applicability of the candidates experience to the position. Again the ratings would be calculated in the same way that they were for the paper screen. Before the decision is made on the top candidate, again all of the interested parties should get together to try and reach consensus as to who should receive the offer.

Because the interview is so important in the selection process, it deserves more preparation than is normally put into it. Goodale in his book, *The Fine Art of Interviewing*, states that, "Most selection interviews are simply not carefully planned."³ He goes on to say that the selection interview has low reliability and low validity even after all of the years that people have been doing such interviews.

The major problem with most selection interviews is that we start with the candidate's previous behavior and from that infer a number of character traits. We then try to infer from these traits what their job performance will be. Instead, Goodale suggests that we try and move directly from past behavior to ascertaining what the candidates will do once they are hired. In order to do this, he says you need to think about the position you want to fill and the expected performance you want for that position. Thus, you need to start with a thorough job analysis and a full understanding of the major responsibilities of the position. For faculty, whether in a teaching

institution or an institution where there is a significant research component, this is not difficult to determine in the gross sense. However, if you are looking for someone to teach solid state devices and the candidate's experience is in power electronics, there may be a significant mismatch.

Goodale suggests the following format for the selection interview that will still allow flexibility.

- Establish rapport - Small talk around something that you both have in common.
- Set the agenda - Explain the purpose of the interview and provide the format.
- Gather information - Here a common set of open ended questions is very useful, particularly about their previous work and non-work experience, their previous education and training, and their current behavior.
- Describe the job and the organization - This step should normally be done after the information gathering so as not to allow applicants to tailor their responses beforehand.
- Answer questions - Here the candidates can learn more about your organization and the position as well as provides additional information.
- Terminate - Thank the candidates for their time and provide them with an approximate timetable for the completion of the process.

Finally, if it is agreed that none of the interviewees are acceptable nor are any of the others in the remaining pool, I strongly urge that the search be reopened. It is better to wait a semester or a year than to hire the wrong person and then let them go after a year and repeat the process all over again.

The Offer

Even if all of the other things have gone right during the search process, the hire could still fail if the offer lacks good faith on either side. One of the common sticking points is salary so it is suggested that the salary be discussed during the interview process if not before. Another issue that arises is moving expenses so the institution needs to have a ready answer to this question. Normally the hire is complete when the candidate signs some form of contract that contains all of the pertinent information regarding salary, starting date, and terms of employment. All of this information should be provided to the candidate ahead of time such that there are no surprises.

Conclusion

While the hiring process is still as much of an art as it is a science, faculty, and in particular the faculty leadership, can take a number of steps that remove some of the uncertainty from the process. By putting the effort into the process that it deserves and following the above steps, you can help to insure the right hire in the right place at the right time.

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DR. WARREN R. HILL

Dr. Warren R. Hill is currently professor of Electronics Engineering Technology and dean of the College of Applied Science and Technology at Weber State University, a position he has held since July, 1990. Prior to that, he was department chair for Engineering Technology at the University of Southern Colorado for 3 ½ years, as well as teaching electronics engineering technology there for nine years. He holds a BSEE and MSEE from the University of Nebraska and Wayne State University, respectively, and Doctor of Engineering degree from the University of Detroit.

