

HOW TO GET AN A+ ON YOUR NEXT HIRE

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When it comes to filling vacant positions at your school, you not only need to find the best talent available, but you also need to locate faculty and administrators who will thrive in your unique community. In many cases, educational institutions overlook or ignore important opportunities to learn information about applicants that could help them make the best choice during the hiring process. While recruiting agencies provide valuable assistance in finding qualified candidates, their work should not be a substitute for a careful and thorough hiring procedure by your school.

CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE POSITION TO BE FILLED

You should begin your recruiting process by carefully considering the position you are trying to fill. Many schools attempt to find the same type of person who previously held the position, without realizing there may be other characteristics better suited to your institution or that would enable the candidate to surpass their predecessor's performance.

Do they need great communication skills, leadership qualities, or the ability to collaborate with others? What are the essential duties of that position? Once the answers to these and similar questions are determined, you should carefully draft a job description to incorporate the traits you are seeking and the functions the employee must be able to perform.

ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

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Schools often miss key opportunities to learn more about their future employees by failing to ask the “tough” questions. An increasing number of schools fail to check with applicants’ prior schools to learn more about them. While it is frustratingly common for previous employers to decline to provide detailed information about their former employees, usually just confirming dates of employment and pay rate, it is still well worth the call. To have a prior Head of School or Department Head provide insight into the potential administrator or faculty member is invaluable and you should never overlook the opportunity to obtain that information.

The interview is another important opportunity to scrutinize the potential employee and ask direct questions. Before compiling the types of questions to be asked, it is important to consider the types of questions that should be avoided. You should train those conducting the interview to avoid discriminatory subjects and questions prohibited by federal, state, and local discrimination laws. These include, but are not limited to, questions about age, ancestry, racial or ethnic background, military status, plans for a family, religious beliefs, and health conditions.

However, it is equally important that interviewers avoid questions that could inadvertently lead to the discovery of such information. For example, train your managers not to ask an applicant when they graduated from high school (which would reveal their age), where they are from (which may reveal their national origin), or similar seemingly innocuous questions that could cause trouble.

You should provide your interviewers with the written information you received from the applicant so they can review it before the interview. This will allow your team to develop questions that will address any red flags, such as gaps in the applicant’s employment history or job hopping. Your application should ask whether the applicant was ever fired, not renewed for employment, or asked to resign from a job – and your interviewers should not be afraid to ask the applicant direct questions about their answers to these questions.

You should also formulate a list of standard questions to ask applicants. This limits the risk of discriminatory hiring and ensures that key questions are included. More importantly, your interviewers should pay attention to the answers. For example, many schools ask their applicants why they are

looking to leave their current position but do not follow up on the answer. This is a wasted opportunity.

If the applicant says they did not get along with management, it is essential that you ask additional questions to find out why. Their answers will help you determine whether they are likely to have similar problems at your school, or whether they were justified in looking to leave their previous job. Your interviewers should carefully listen to the answers and not be afraid to press applicants on responses that could indicate trouble spots.

DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT

To counter negligent and discriminatory hiring claims, documentation is key. You should appoint someone on your hiring team to maintain a file on each potential hire. The file should include notes taken during interviews (perhaps including a summary of the applicant's pros and cons), reference check information, the resume, and employment application.

You should obtain a complete and signed application from your potential hires, and not just a resume. Your application will likely include important additional provisions, such as a confirmation of the truthfulness of the answers in the application (and resulting termination if the responses are found to be false), the applicant's agreement to reference checks, reiteration that employment at your institution is at will, notification that they may be required to submit to a pre-employment medical examination or drug screening, consent to any necessary clearances, and confirmation that any offer of employment is contingent upon the successful completion of background checks.

BACKGROUND CHECKS SHOULD HELP, NOT HURT

Background checks provide important information, but you must use this information carefully to avoid legal liability. Several states and local jurisdictions have "banned the box," prohibiting you from asking about criminal convictions on the application itself. In some states, you might also be prohibited from hiring individuals who have been convicted of certain offenses. You should be aware of local laws and follow those directives.

Regardless of whether you operate in a “ban-the-box” location, you should avoid applying blanket policies that bar anyone with any sort of criminal background from being hired. If you make a hiring decision based on criminal information uncovered during a background check, you must be able to articulate why the information is job-related and consistent with business necessity.

You should make such employment decisions only after you conduct an individualized assessment of the job and criminal background results. Look at the type of job applied for and assess the nature and gravity of the offense, the time that has passed since the individual was convicted or completed their sentence, the nature of the job sought and whether the conviction is relevant to it, the person’s contributions to society and rehabilitation efforts after conviction, and their age at the time of conviction. If you are unsure, you can consult with your legal counsel to see if the criminal history justifies a decision not to hire the applicant.

Finally, although it might be commonplace for employers to conduct internet searches on applicants, the best practice is to have a trusted person at your school who is not otherwise involved in the hiring process conduct the search and pass along only information relevant to the job. This person should carefully screen out any information that reveals the applicant’s protected status information before passing anything on to the decision makers.

CONCLUSION

Hiring the right person can enhance your school’s goals and vitality, while the wrong fit can set your school back in both its mission and the trust engendered within the school community. Therefore, it is important to develop hiring procedures that are carefully tailored to reduce the risks of litigation, while maximizing the likelihood that you will hire the best candidate.

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