

Hiring Good Help

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Look around at the people you consider to be successful and you will usually find excellent support staff close by. Setting goals is only part of achieving success. You also have to choose the right people to help you accomplish your goals. Whether it is a nurse manager, lab technician, or nanny, these are the people who help you get things done and who free you to think and move forward. A reliable, trustworthy employee who has the ability to troubleshoot small problems can simplify your life, enabling you to focus on the "big picture." In contrast, someone who cannot get along with the rest of your team members or who is unable to listen and follow directions may make your life miserable.

Building a team requires thought and effort. Ironically, many of us are more comfortable with, and spend more time, choosing a computer or the latest PDA than in hiring/screening employees. We may complain about the amount of time it takes to hire a new employee, but the consequences of hiring a bad employee may be worse than having no employee at all. Think about the time spent resolving conflicts in the lab or office because of personality issues or the lost productivity resulting from the loss of a highly functional employee whom you have spent many hours training. Minimizing the risk of these situations occurring requires that you invest time and energy in the selection process to find employees who are not only technically proficient, but who are also loyal and compatible with their lab or office mates.

The hiring process usually consists of placing an ad, reviewing written applications, and conducting a personal interview. Here, we will discuss the overall hiring process with a special emphasis on hiring technical or office help.

Before beginning, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What are your goals and performance expectations for this position? For instance, what hours is the person expected to work? If you are looking for a lab technician, what sort of skills will this person need? Cell culture? Molecular biology skills? Will this person

be expected to have any supervisory or managerial duties? Keep a budget? Be available via beeper and/or work weekends?

Think about what is essential. Are you willing to train a recent graduate or are you looking for someone with experience? Keep in mind that technical skills can be taught, but that character traits come well established. It is best to know ahead of time whether you can't stand someone being late or who keeps a messy desk. Perhaps you are willing to compromise on certain traits in exchange for honesty or good humor. You must also consider the personalities and needs of the other people on your team. People do not have to socialize with each other, but they have to be able to work together. Having a team of highly skilled individuals who are constantly bickering detracts from the overall team mission. In contrast, the intellectual and emotional synergy that results when a group of people work together and encourage each other's efforts not only facilitates success but also produces results that exceed expectations.

2. What questions will you be asking? Your questions should enable you to screen individuals for the qualifications and attributes needed to successfully fill your position. Hence, it is also important to know what answers you are looking for.

3. Where you are going to conduct the interview? This is especially important for junior faculty who may be sharing office space. The personal interview may be the most important part of the entire process, and in some cases may be the only opportunity you have to find out information about the potential employee before you make your decision (or mistake!). Make sure you have access to someplace quiet that will enable you to conduct the interview uninterrupted.

The Hiring Process

View the job ad as an initial screening procedure. In some cases, such as when seeking to hire for a position through a university or other large organization, there may be a template available or an online job board. The ad should be concise, but include information that is essential for the job and enable the potential hiree to decide whether s/he even wants to answer the ad. For instance, if the person will be expected to work weekends or nights on a

regular basis or if specific technical skills are absolutely necessary for the position or salary information, this will save both of you valuable time.

Determine your organization's hiring policies. For instance, there may be different tracks for people performing research at large academic institutions, e.g., research technician versus research scientist, union versus non-union. Are there any requirements for preferentially evaluating applications, such as recent layoffs, for a new position? Will there be a probation period involved? This may be important when determining what kind of fringe benefits you will be able to offer the applicant.

When you receive the written applications, prioritize them in terms of suitability. For instance, when hiring a lab technician, I look for past experience to give me an idea of technical skills as well as stability. Someone who has been changing positions frequently raises a red flag in my mind. Next, I have found it useful to conduct an initial short telephone interview to go over other essential information to help further weed out inappropriate applicants and avoid unnecessary interviews. For example, availability may be an issue; a person may not be able to start within the timeframe needed.

Conducting the Interview

The interview allows you to evaluate the person for certain character traits. It is important to understand and avoid your own biases so that you can conduct the interview in an objective manner. In other words, do not let that nose ring distract you from fairly evaluating the candidate's character traits.

The interview also gives you an opportunity to sell the position to the candidate. Again, it is important that you understand your institution's hiring policies so that you do not mislead candidates in terms of fringe benefits, retirement benefits, etc. It is important to clearly define the work environment and your expectations. For instance, the candidate may be a very quiet person who may not function well in a large bustling lab or group.

Things you may want to know—is the person:

- Stable?

- Reliable?
- Hard working?
- Determined?
- Loyal?
- Able to learn new skills?
- Able to troubleshoot?
- Able to work independently?
- A team-player?
- Leadership potential?

If technical skills are important for the job, be sure to ask specific questions that will enable you to evaluate the candidate's expertise in that area. However, open-ended questions will be more valuable in helping you to determine whether the candidate is a good fit for the job you have to offer. You need to understand the candidate's expectations and whether they synch with yours. The answers to these questions should enable you to get an idea of what a candidate's strengths and weaknesses are. Ask questions in a positive manner. It is important to make the applicant feel at ease. A relaxed person is more likely to open up and let you learn more about him/herself. While a certain amount of small talk may be helpful in accomplishing this, remember the purpose of the interview is to enable both you and the candidate to learn more about each other and the position.

Some good open-ended questions: Tell me about your current job. What do you like/dislike about it? Salary aside, describe your perfect job. What is the most important thing about being a lab technician or respiratory therapist? What is the most difficult situation you have faced in the workplace and how did you handle it?

Red Flags

Use your intuition. Clues such as a candidate not showing up on time, defensiveness during the interview, inappropriately focused on what you or the company can do for her/him rather than what s/he brings to the position, appears very uncomfortable during the interview, dominates the conversation or cannot provide references, should raise doubts in your mind that will require investigation.

When the interview is completed, be sure to tell the candidate when to expect a decision from you. There is no absolute rule as to how long to keep a person waiting, but be aware that these are people's lives with which you are dealing. Also, the longer it takes, the more likely the applicant will have a chance to find another offer.

Other Things to Consider

If the employee will be working with other people in your group, consider inviting the top candidates back for a second interview with other members of the group. This will give you an opportunity to directly observe group dynamics and to get feedback from the people who will be interacting with the new employee on a daily basis.

Checking References

This is imperative!!! Make sure you call *everyone*. Written references are often bland and unrevealing. People are often more willing to be more direct on the telephone. This is your chance to find out how the candidate actually functioned in a work environment. Did they get along with everyone? Were they reliable? Punctual? Careful? If you are hiring a lab technician, how involved were they in carrying out the experiments? How independent were they? Listen for silences and what people don't say. And always ask if the former employer would be willing to hire the person again and why or why not?

Ready to Hire

Before you call to offer someone a job, check with your human resources department to make sure you have fulfilled all the requirements and have completed the necessary documentation in terms of evaluating applications. Make sure you understand clearly what you are able to offer the candidate in terms of salary and benefits. Research salaries often come from multiple sources which may affect fringe and retirement benefits. Will there be a probationary period? What does this entail? Is there any orientation required? If so, who will provide it? The goal is to avoid misunderstandings that can result in feelings of resentment—you want to be able to start off on a good foot!

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