How to Hire Like a Search Firm

By J.R. Tarabocchia

It's not unusual for colleges and universities to use search firms to recruit and hire their top executive (the president or chancellor), but many institutions are also employing these firms to find other leaders, including provosts, deans and sometimes even directors. We all know that losing an employee and hiring a new one is expensive — costs can include overtime or stipend expenses to pay other employees to get the work done when a coworker leaves the job; the manpower and time it takes to develop or update a position description; fees associated with posting an advertisement; time spent on resume reviews, interviews and background and reference checks; relocation expenses; training costs; and more. Add to that the tens of thousands of dollars a professional search firm might charge for a single search, and it's easy to break the bank.

Undoubtedly, search firms can add value and organization to the search process. From pre-search preparation (which includes creating a timeline, forming a search committee, creating a position specification and laying the groundwork for the search) to recruiting talent, interviewing, selecting a candidate and closing the deal, search firms guide the process to keep things running smoothly. They also typically commit to continue the search until a successful candidate has been found, and some even provide a guarantee that if the hired candidate leaves within one year of his or her start date, they will conduct another search at reduced or no additional cost. This is why search firms are expensive (and likely why they are so prevalent) — because they provide a guarantee.

However, contrary to what we might expect based on usage and practice, in an article entitled "You Don't Need a Search Firm to Hire a President" in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, former American University provost and interim president Milton Greenberg posits that "there is no evidence that the use of a search firm improves the quality or longevity of administrative leaders compared with those chosen the old-fashioned way."

So what if we could learn to hire like a search firm — to adapt the best practices followed by the best search companies to bring the best people on board? What if we could make our hiring process as efficient and effective and foolproof as possible? When the position for which you're hiring requires a search process, here are some steps you can take to hire like the pros (but without the hefty price tag!).

Step 1: Create a Timeline

The hiring manager and/or search committee chair should begin a search by clearly outlining the search timeline and process. He or she should determine the potential start date for the candidate, then work backward. A backward hiring timeline might look like this:

- New employee begins
- Two weeks prior (perhaps longer, depending on the position): offer is made, new employee accepts, gives notice to current employer and relocates if need be
- Three weeks prior: committee gives feedback to hiring manager; hiring manager makes final decision
- Seven weeks prior: finalists are on campus
- Eight to nine weeks prior: initial interviews
- Eleven weeks prior: application review
- Twelve to fifteen weeks prior: receive applications
- Sixteen weeks prior: position description is written and position goes through HR approvals; position is posted

Step 2: Form the Search Committee

Another early task is for the hiring manager and/or search committee chair to identify, form and charge the search committee. The search committee might include peers or colleagues of the position; a direct report of the position; important stakeholders and community members; a representative from the student body; a subject matter expert; and a representative from human resources. Keeping the search committee to five to seven members can help in ensuring the committee is not too unwieldy. The largest search committee I have chaired had 12 members, and while we accomplished the task of having buy-in from many campus stakeholders, we never had one meeting when the entire committee was able to attend. It's also important to bring together a diverse group of individuals to serve on the search committee. Training the team on inclusive hiring practices and diversity is also of paramount importance.

Hiring, even for executive-level positions, isn't rocket science — it just takes time, patience and a commitment to doing it the right way.

Step 3: Identify the Purpose of the Search Committee

It is important for a search committee to understand its role and purpose from the outset. Some search committees facilitate the entire process, including making the final hiring decision. Some committees' end goal is to narrow the pool, bring candidates to campus and provide a pro/con list of each finalist to the hiring manager. Ensuring that the committee knows exactly what is expected of it from beginning to end can help save time and guide the committee's tasks.

Step 4: Create a Position Profile

Creating a specific and detailed profile for the position can greatly benefit your recruiting process, as this document will be the basis for the advertisement for the position. With a position profile, the more information the better. A profile should include the following:

- An overview of the institution;
- Information about the position, both high-level and day-to-day;
- Mission, vision, values, philosophy and history of the institution and division or department;
- The portfolio of the position;
- How to apply; and
- Information on key individuals, including the direct supervisor, president and/or chancellor.

Step 5: Advertise the Position and Recruit Candidates

There are many places online to post job recruitment information, including professional organizations, social media and your organization's website. I have routinely posted on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, consortium websites like HigherEdJobs.com, The Chronicle of Higher Education, CUPA-HR's JobLine and e-mail listservs. I am quite fond of LinkedIn's recruiting website (at the time of this writing, this service costs around $1,500 per year), which pushes your job posting to potential applicants and gives you a top 50 list of potential applicant "matches" who are in your local area. The great thing about posting a position on social media is that if you ask your coworkers to retweet, share or like the posting, your potential reach could grow exponentially.

The absolute best recruitment mechanism I have used and the way I have found most finalists for a particular position is to directly reach out to potential candidates (or to people whom I know, who themselves know potential candidates). This method of reaching out to people who would be great candidates but might not think to apply for a position is precisely what search firms do. The easiest way to start this process is to come up with a list of names of people to whom to reach out (ask the search committee, direct reports, other colleagues and stakeholders to suggest people whom they think might be a good fit). You can build your list by looking at other comparator or aspirational schools and finding people who are currently in the same or similar position and by accessing membership lists of professional organizations related to the position.

This unsolicited targeting might seem like an unwanted telemarketer calling at dinner; however, my experience is that the majority of times, an e-mail or phone call of this nature opens the door for more dialogue. Typically the reply is "I'm honored. Who nominated me? Can you tell me a little more about the position?"

Step 6: Centralize Search Resources

Having a centralized, password-protected website for all of the files associated with the search can be a helpful tool for search committees. Items that might be included on such a website include meeting minutes, meeting agendas, a list of committee members and their contact information, the position description, the committee's charge, organizational charts, the timeline for the search, outreach and advertising methods, sample communications to candidates, information about the selection process and candidate applications.

Having a centralized place for materials can help keep things moving in the event that the search chair is unable to complete his or her duties. It also allows committee members who cannot attend every meeting to participate.

Step 7: Practice the High-Touch Approach

The devil really is in the details. I've been a member of many search committees and an applicant for many positions where the details were simply forgotten or not cared about. Missing some details might not have any effect on the final outcome, but following through with and paying attention to them demonstrates the culture and warmth of your college or university. Training and onboarding really begin when an individual applies for a job, not on his or her first day. The principles I use are simple: over-communicate and treat candidates like I would want to be treated if I were in their shoes.

Take the time to advise applicants of their status and take special care to communicate with those who will not proceed further. As a general rule of thumb, I always e-mail a candidate immediately after he or she has applied. In that

initial e-mail, I include a tentative timeline so that candidates can know what to expect. For candidates who have made it to the point of interview, I prepare them in advance by providing them with a list of people who are on the search committee and others whom they will meet during the process, a copy of organizational charts, and sometimes specific information to review, such as websites, budget documents or annual reports. Providing this information helps narrow the focus of the interview to what is really important and gets to the heart of whether the candidate has the skills and is a good fit for a particular job.

In higher ed, we often like to have marathon interview days (yes, days — plural!) for many of our positions. It should go without saying, but be sure to give the candidate a schedule of events, make sure that breaks are scheduled, offer water and ask frequently if the candidate needs anything (and be prepared to get it).

In the interview room, consider giving the candidate a copy of the interview questions that he or she can read while at the table. This can really help with multi-part questions and with candidates whose first language might not be English.

Hiring Made Easy

Hiring, even for executive-level positions, is not rocket science — it just takes time, patience and a commitment to doing it the right way. You can't take shortcuts, and you can't vary the process too much from one hire to the next. Consistency and a solid plan are key. By adapting the best practices of search firms to your own hiring process, you can be just as successful as they are in finding the right talent for your institution, and for a fraction of the cost.

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