Finding the best candidate to fill a vacancy requires careful planning, thorough communication, and attention to both current and anticipated future needs.

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In my last column, I wrote about succession planning, which is linked to retention and job satisfaction. As this issue of Information Outlook addresses recruitment and retention, it seems natural to follow up on some of the themes I raised in the previous column.

Recruitment and retention are integral to creating a positive and effective information center. How we locate and retain good people reflects our philosophies about hiring and organizational culture. The process of finding new people for our organizations should not be taken lightly, but it is not as onerous as many supervisors fear.

The reality is that often we become worried because we are losing a good person and must try to replace skills that may not be readily available in the workplace. There are many good people out there looking for work, however, so we have an opportunity to not only replace existing skills but develop new ones in-house if we find the right person.

With that in mind, it’s helpful to think about what kind of person you really want to hire. Has the position existed for a long time? If so, should you review its description and qualifications before posting a vacancy announcement? Do you want to replace the skill set of the previous employee, or is it possible to bring in new skills or areas of focus that you did not need before? Is there an internal candidate that you think would be perfect for the position? Is there someone internal who would like to take on some of the responsibilities of the position, thereby allowing you to develop and post a different position?

Think about the future as well as the present. Make a list of the skills and experience you need today and what you think you’ll need in the future. Does your list describe the position that has become vacant? (If you’re hiring for a union position, changing a job description can be time-consuming, so you need to plan early—ideally before the incumbent’s departure). Always work with your Human Resources Department when changing job descriptions to ensure you craft a quality job posting.

When recruiting, you need to go to the obvious places as well as use your informal networks. SLA provides international coverage, and other library associations or job boards are available as well. Informal networks are helpful, but I believe that to be successful you need to reach as many applicants as possible, even if you think the person you met at an event last week is perfect for the job. Don’t presuppose what you hear or see from potential candidates or résumés before you interview.

Interviewing Candidates

When preparing for interviews, you need to consider the type of interview as well as the people involved. Will you require a presentation? If so, what information do you need to convey to the applicants ahead of the interviews? How many departments will they need to meet with? What other information should they receive? You obviously want them to do their homework about your organization, but sometimes internal information is helpful for candidates to review before the interview.

Make sure you have the right people on the interview panel. Your organization may prescribe who will sit on the panel, or you may be able to choose the members yourself. Either way, try to ensure you include people who will be working closely with the candidate as well as people with disparate opinions. It’s amazing how different people hear different things in interviews.

Prepare all questions prior to the interviews to avoid any hint of bias against particular candidates. Review best practices for asking interview questions and work with your HR Department as needed. Be sure to develop several types of questions so you can acquire the information you need about a person’s skills, attitudes, communication style, experience, and “fit” with your team. Include behavioral questions (which probe actual experiences and shed light on how a person behaved in a particular situation in the past) as well as scenario-centered queries.

Interview only as many people as you can realistically manage. For a temporary position, you may want to interview only two or three candidates; for permanent positions, you’ll probably want to have a larger pool—up to six for the
first round. You may or may not want to schedule a second set of interviews for a couple of short-listed candidates. These interviews can be helpful if, for example, you want to elicit additional perspectives from the candidates when they meet with client groups.

When interviewing, write down all of the candidates’ responses. I take copious notes to help me interpret decisions later and ensure that my evaluations are consistent across all candidates. For example, a friendly, relaxed candidate may, on the surface, seem to be an excellent choice, but a nervous candidate who actually answers all of the questions may very well be my best candidate. Evaluating their responses will ensure that I am not judging the candidates’ demeanors but instead the actual content of what they said. Having some sort of marking key available will help you identify the ideal answers for the questions you pose.

**Aiding Employee Retention**

Be honest with internal candidates about their opportunities within the organization. I received an e-mail recently from someone who was frustrated by his organization’s lack of succession planning and unclear messaging about whether there would be opportunities for him to move up. Ideally, you should speak with your staff at the earliest opportunity about their ideas and plans for their career development; then, when positions become vacant, you should touch base with them to find out whether they are interested (or explain to them why you are choosing to post outside the organization). If possible, allow existing staff to take on roles and responsibilities that become available, as this will help in their retention.

When someone new starts working on your team, remember to provide him or her with the support needed to be successful in the position and within the organization. Orientations, meetings and introductions are the minimum. You should also be clear about your expectations for communication and feedback as well as any short-term goals you may have for them. **SLA**

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