What Candidates Want:

How to Practice Compassionate Hiring

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Despite a few misanthropes and some culturally instilled foibles, librarians in general are nice. We are in the business of helping people, after all. This article will describe how people who hire librarians can help job hunters by taking steps to make the process better, or at least more painless. Plenty of articles dispense advice on what employers are looking for, but this one will explore what candidates want.

I run a blog called Hiring Librarians, which uses surveys to present information about library hiring. One such is a survey of job hunters, co-written by Naomi House from I Need a Library Job. Between December 28, 2012 and May 6, 2014, 476 job hunting library workers filled out our survey (and we are still counting - the survey will remain open indefinitely). We didn't use representative sampling, and we did not practice rigorous scholarship, so it would be inappropriate for me to claim that I can make accurate generalizations about the larger population of library job hunters using this sample. However, I can share what survey respondents said, I can report my own understanding based on more than two years of blogging for library job hunters, and I can suggest possibilities for increasing compassion in the practice of hiring librarians.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Looking for work is a process of mystery and constant wondering. Candidates wonder if you received their applications, if you read them, if their invitation to interview is lost in the mail, and above all they wonder "what is taking so long!" Lack of communication is a common problem for applicants. One survey respondent described the process:

> Of the dozen jobs I applied for after graduation, I received "thanks but no thanks" and no interview within 2 months from 2, heard back and interviewed for 3, heard no thanks after 3+ months from 4, and never heard back, period, from 3.

Especially when hiring for entry level positions, consider that candidates may not have participated in hiring a librarian. Although many candidates understand that hiring is a lengthy process, many do not. For example, one respondent shared the following story:

> Don't lead me on. I had a horrible experience with my Undergrad institution having an opening for an assistant librarian. I was one of 2 candidates interviewed. I was interviewed on Monday, the other person was interviewed on Wednesday. If this other

candidate was chosen or "blew" the committee away, why did I find out that I had not received the job until 3:45 p.m. on a Friday? This was extremely rude and inconsiderate. It was nine months ago, and I am really sour and sad about the job hunting/application/ interview process.

To this candidate, a delay of two days was enough to create a "horrible experience." This illustrates how applicants may not understand the steps being taken, in this case what happens between an initial job offer and actual hiring. Clear communication of your process, and the length of time each stage might take, can alleviate some of this misunderstanding.

Some organizations take months to hire, some take weeks. Your applicants have no way of knowing where you fall on this spectrum unless you tell them. When you've moved to the next stage, let candidates who have not been chosen know. If your timeline changes, share that too. You can even let runners-up know if you've made an offer and it is pending negotiation or background investigation.

This does not mean you need to spend a lot of time crafting personal messages or on the phone explaining yourself. The majority of our respondents preferred to be contacted by email, either in all situations (42%) or in "phone for good news and email for bad news" (40%). But any method is better than no contact. If a form email is not possible due to time or technology, one respondent suggested, "even a generic update on a website saying, 'we are now at the phone interview stage' is more charitable than silence."

Provide Feedback

Writing applications and interviewing are skills, and helping candidates to improve those skills, as well as to understand where they might be lacking in experience or education, is a wonderful service to your profession. Create a process to provide feedback to candidates who are not chosen.

It is understandable that you might not have time to write a personal note to each of the 100+ applicants you get for a position. However, you might be able to send a targeted form email to groups within the larger pool. Chances are that there was a reason in addition to "lots of qualified candidates" for the elimination of each application. You could write three or four forms to send out to the first round cuts, describing the more specific category or categories that caused the elimination - not enough customer service experience, no MLIS, typos, etc.

If you don't want to proactively provide feedback, and this may be more handholding than you need to be doing anyway, your job announcement or website could include a sentence about being willing to provide feedback, even if only to those who reach the interview stage. Candidates may be too intimidated to ask.

Your honesty will not only help candidates improve, it will help them to self-select out of the application process, and thin out applicant pools. As one survey respondent said:

If time allows for feedback, provide that in a kind and positive way. This means not giving false hope. If there is no way you would consider someone with a certain background for a position in your organization, then say that.

Let them get to know the real you

Candidates want to know about you and your staff. 92% of respondents picked "Meeting department members/potential co-workers" as one of the most important events in deciding if they wanted a job. Contrast this with the mere 37% who wanted to meet with HR to talk about benefits and salary. Meeting you and your current staff need not be an elaborate affair (only 3% picked "being taken out for a meal" as a factor), but candidates want to do things like "[see] how management reacts to new ideas and if people get along" and get "a sense of the supervisor's style as a boss and their personality."

Build time for informal interaction into your process. Humanizing the process not only allows your candidates to get to know you, it enables the process of determining "fit" to become a two way street. They will be intrigued! They will be more relaxed, and they, in turn, will be more honest with you. You will be more likely to gain a happy worker, who can contribute to your workplace culture.

Don't waste the candidate's time

In addition to opening lines of communication, providing feedback, and letting candidates get to know the "real you," respect your candidates' time and effort. Give them the details they need to decide if they want to invest the commitment required by the application process. Be honest about the requirements of the job, even if they may be unsavory. As one respondent said,

> "Both candidate and employer have the same goal--get the right person in the right job. Just like you wouldn't want to find out after hiring that the employee didn't complete that degree or have that much experience with a task, the employee shouldn't find out that thirty days of travel are required each year or nights and weekend hours are a must."

Begin by writing an accurate job announcement, with minimal HR speak. Knowledgeable candidates who are taking the process seriously will read your announcement carefully, and write their applications to highlight how they meet your requirements. If you have a laundry list of wishes and vestigial functions, these serious, qualified candidates will be frustrated and angry before you even begin to build a relationship. In contrast, if you write a realistic announcement that reflects the character of your workplace, you will draw in the candidates best suited to work with you. They may even write more interesting, passionate cover letters.

If you have a strong internal candidate and are just going through the motions, consider letting candidates know. Letting people get their hopes up when they don't have a chance of realizing them may be business as usual, but it is also cruel. If you have a strong internal candidate and still want to look at a diverse applicant pool, you should consider stating that as well. If you

have a strong internal candidate but are required by law to open the position to the general public, and to give them fair consideration, I wish you would say that too (although I understand if you think you can't). Be as honest as possible about the situation.

Post the salary range. It can be a large range. A ballpark idea will let candidates know if the position is feasible for them. As one respondent put it, "list the required working hours and salary so that we don't waste our time on applications for jobs that we can't take even if offered."

Finally, respect the time of your candidates' network. Are those letters of recommendation included with the initial application really necessary? Consider the numbers. If you get 100 applications for your position, and require 3 letters of recommendation from each, that is an additional 300 people who have spent, perhaps wasted, an hour or more on something you have asked them to do.

> "...there is no way I'm going to burden my references with the request for a handcrafted letter. It is not their job to get me a job, it is my job. Just call them after a phone or on-site interview, if you think that their testimony may [affect] your hiring decision. It has occurred many times that I will forego applying for a job strictly because the ad asks for 3 letters. What do the hiring committees think professors and supervisors spend their days doing that they have time to write letters for us all?"

In short, please be kind

Looking for work, even when you are already employed, is nerve-wracking and often unpleasant. In a tough market, where candidates may also be counting the days until their ability to pay rent or buy food disappears, the discomfort of the process is magnified. Just as candidates must consider what hiring managers want, hiring managers should consider what candidates want. The measures taken need not be grandiose or time consuming. As one respondent put it, "honestly, some courtesy from the employer would make the entire process more bearable." Please build kindness into your next recruitment process.

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