New Perspectives in Leadership

Adopting a Proactive Library Recruitment Strategy

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Introduction

As librarians, we all have experienced being job applicants. The job search process, at least for academic library jobs, looks something like this:

1) We look for jobs on job websites.
2) We see a job ad description that we are qualified for (or somewhat qualified for).
3) We submit our application.
4) We are invited for a telephone interview.
5) We are then invited to visit the library for a one-to-two day face-to-face interview with the search committee, the hiring department, and many other people. We are usually asked to deliver a presentation, and we have meals with various people who work at that library and/or the university.
6) After the campus interview, we are left to sweat and wait for an offer (either to us or to somebody else, because usually libraries do not notify rejected candidates until an offer has been accepted). The entire process can last up to nine months.

Sound familiar? If your answer is yes, then I am a bit disappointed. Not with you, of course, but with the familiar model of library hiring. As librarians, we always experiment with new ideas in different areas of librarianship, but I have noticed that the process of hiring librarians has lagged far behind in terms of innovation.

Background

My job at Kansas State University Libraries is to research new innovations and develop them into prototypes that our libraries could experiment with and implement. After serving on several search committees, I observed that there was a lot of room for improvement in terms of our library's hiring process. Being on the hiring side gave me a very different perspective of the job application process. It is easy to believe that the hiring organization holds all the power in the search process, but in reality, it is actually a two-way interaction between a library and a good candidate. In other words, while we are interviewing and assessing the candidate, the candidate is also evaluating us. From my personal experience, the libraries that conducted the best interviews were those who understood this principle.

Hiring the wrong people could cost the library much more than money. Recently I attended a conference, and one of the keynote speakers spoke about how hiring a tenure-track faculty is a 35-year investment. Imagine having a wrong person at the library for 35 years! In the business world, it is generally estimated that replacing an employee costs a business one-half to five times that employee's

annual salary. Tony Hsieh of Zappos.com said in an interview that making bad hires has cost his company over $100 million.[1] If we understand what is at stake (which unfortunately a lot of organizations do not seem to), then we should realize that we need to do all we can to make sure that we hire the right person. It is almost cliché to claim that people are an organization's biggest asset, but how many libraries actually operate that way?

Issues

With this in mind, in 2011, I set about working with my Director of Human Resources to assess areas of weakness in our hiring process and develop a new recruitment strategy. We identified two main areas of concern:

1) The length of the hiring process. We estimated that from the posting of the job ad to making an offer, the process often took about sixteen weeks. While this time frame is actually quite common in academic libraries, we had lost candidates to other institutions because of it.

2) The quality of our candidate pool. The success of filling the vacancy with a good candidate depends heavily on the quality of the candidate pool, which always seems to be out of our control. With certain positions, we would only get a handful of under qualified candidates, and ended up not able to fill the position. Usually we would bemoan the situation and close the search, and then reopen it with the same job description, the same marketing strategy, and hope for a different result.

On a very basic level, there are two types of recruitment. One is the "they find us" approach, which most libraries use. We post job ads and wait for people to apply. It is a passive way of hiring. The other method is the "we find them" approach, which is a proactive way to seek out the most suitable candidates. There many stories about how successful companies and entrepreneurs identify the best people and use creative tactics to entice them to join. My intention was to change our library recruitment effort from "they find us" to "we find them," from passive to proactive.

When we looked at the length of the hiring process, we identified several contributing factors:

- There was a large amount of paperwork back and forth with the Office of Affirmative Action on campus.
- The search committees tended to be quite large (on average seven to nine people), and scheduling meetings at times everyone could attend often delayed the process.
- The search committee members were not allowed to begin screening applications until after the job application closing date.
- Search committee members had no urgency in speeding up the process. We had an us-centered attitude instead of a candidate-centered attitude.

To improve our appeal to candidates, we identified these areas of concern:

- Our job advertisements/descriptions tended to be dry and lacked "personality," as they were not design to elicit desire or passion in the potential candidates.
- There were long lists of required qualifications for each job (0ver 10 items on average), which discouraged a lot of potential candidates and limited our pool.
- The long list of required/preferred qualifications also implied that we were always looking for a "perfect" candidate with all those qualifications who might not even exist, instead of being open-minded about possibilities.
- We did not make any effort in "selling" our organization and our environment. We have an excellent workplace and our town has many positive qualities that our potential candidates did not know about.
- We always used the same marketing channels to promote our job openings.
- We did not have a long term recruitment plan. We always waited until we had vacancies to begin looking for candidates.
- We were not able to attract many candidates from outside of the Kansas/Midwest region.

Solutions

Once we had identified the areas we needed to work on, we developed a new strategy with a long term view of changing our hiring philosophy from a passive one to a proactive one. The first step was to get our senior leaders on board to agree that recruiting the right talents is of the highest importance in our organization. It was crucial to have the support of the administration for any changes we wanted to make.

During this time, the library and other colleges and units on campus met with the Office of Affirmative Action to discuss how to make the hiring process more efficient, and we gave them our thoughts and suggestions. The Office of Affirmative Action, with a new director, then developed a new set of procedures that greatly reduced the paperwork required, and allowed us to begin screening applications as soon as they come in.

We created a new Recruitment Team to replace the search committee. The purpose of the Recruitment Team is to become a proactive force in finding the best talents for the library. We decided to keep the team small and agile, with only four core members. This makes scheduling meetings a lot easier than having a large committee. The team is trained in our new approach and each of us is on the same page of our mission. If one member is unavailable during the recruitment process, we simply move on without delay, which is a departure from the old practice.

We rewrote our job advertisements to appeal to the people we want to attract by showcasing our library's culture, ambition, and community in a friendly way. We worked with the hiring departments in limiting the required qualifications to no more than five "must haves." Not only does it broaden our potential candidate pool, it also lessens the screening time needed for the Recruitment Team members.

As a result of all these changes, we have reduced the hiring time frame from sixteen weeks to eight weeks.

Long Term Recruitment Plan

A more ambitious part of our new recruitment strategy is to gradually build up a pipeline of talents, to identify the best, the brightest, and the most suitable in the librarianship, and actively reach out to them. Very often, when we wait until there is a job opening and to rely only on the job ads, we are only reaching the "active candidates," candidates who are actively looking for jobs. Studies have shown that that is only a small percentage of the workforce, and we are missing out on the "passive candidates," those who are not actively looking for jobs, but are willing to move if the right opportunity comes up.

In order to reach the elusive passive candidates, we are casting our net further and wider. As many of our librarians attend and present at regional, national, and international conferences, we ask them to look out for outstanding talents at those venues, and network with them. We plan to build up a database of emerging leaders who might one day be interested in one of our positions. By doing this, we are also hoping that we could slowly build up a reputation as an organization that highly values talented people.

Because of our location, we typically attract mostly candidates who are in the Midwest region, or are originally from the Midwest region. We would like to expand our candidate pool to the rest of the country. One way is to highlight the positive aspects of living in Kansas, and another way to more actively promote our library at conferences and library schools.

Conclusion

This is a long term project, especially as there is a second component that goes hand in hand with the recruitment plan that we have not explored yet: retention. So far, we have received very positive reactions from both staff and applicants on our efforts. At first, I was a little bit apprehensive about sharing our project as recruitment is one of the few areas where libraries actually compete with each other. However, the right person for us may not be the right person for another library, and vice versa. I would much rather see people utilizing their talents at the libraries that are the most suitable for them. I hope that by sharing our plan, we can encourage other libraries to become more innovative in the hiring process, and in turn share those ideas so we can all improve this neglected area of librarianship.

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Reference

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