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Potential Fit to the Department Outweighs Professional Criteria in the Hiring Process in Academic Libraries

Hultman Özek, Yvonne

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



Evidence Summary

Potential Fit to the Department Outweighs Professional Criteria in the Hiring Process in Academic Libraries

A Review of:

Wang, Z. & Guarria, C. (2010). Unlocking the mystery: What academic library search committees look for in filling faculty positions. *Technical Services Quarterly*, 27, 66–86.

Reviewed by:

Yvonne Hultman Özek
Senior Librarian
Lund University, Faculty of Medicine,
Lund, Sweden
Email: Yvonne.Hultman_Ozek@med.lu.se

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Objective – To identify key factors affecting the probability of obtaining an interview and being hired for an academic library position.

Design – An online survey was distributed via the following electronic mail lists: ACRL, LITA, COLLIB, METRO, ACQNET, COLLDV, ULS, EQUILIBR, and ALF. The questionnaire was posted via StudentVoice, an assessment survey provider.

Setting – Academic libraries in the United States.

Subjects – The 242 academic library search committees that responded to the online survey.

Methods – The authors reviewed the literature on the hiring process in academic libraries. A questionnaire for an online survey was developed. The instrument contained closed questions with the option to add comments. The survey was available for completion June 3 to June 15, 2008.

Main Results – Skills and performance of job requirements were rated as the most important criteria by 90% of the 242 academic library search committees that responded to the survey. Previous academic library experience was rated as essential by 38%. The findings also showed that committees are positive towards hiring recent graduates, and over 90% check references. In addition, 75% of the respondents emphasized the importance of skills in bibliographic instruction (BI),

particularly when choosing staff for public services.

Furthermore, of the 242 respondents, 47.52%, answering the corresponding question indicated that a relevant cover letter, correct spelling, and declaration of the candidate's activities over all time periods are crucial aspects.

Those in favour of using a weighted scoring system, 37% of 218 respondents, felt that it served as a tool to level the playing field for gathering accurate information, and it also helped to improve the efficiency as well as speed of the hiring process. However, 62.84% of the respondents commented that a weighted scoring system is too prescribed, and some universities did not allow the use of this method. Of 218 respondents, 65% employed evaluation forms after an interview, 38% reported that they would go beyond the applicant's given references, and 61% felt that the applicant's potential to fit into the department was important. The "potential fit" criteria scored the highest of these criteria: demonstrated performance of job requirements; cover letter; and knowledge of trends in latest developments in library science (p. 74). Of 211 respondents, 47.39% reported that the average length of the search process was 4 to 6 months. Most respondents perceived the search process as slow.

Conclusion – In general, the survey offered an overview of current practices of academic library search committees, which can aid those on the hiring side as well as those who are seeking a job. Based on the results, the authors state that, in addition to all of the job requirements, it is vital to consider the potential fit of the applicant within the department. The hiring of candidates with less experience emphasizes the significance of fitting into the department and can be weighed against selection of individuals with more experience. This conclusion is encouraging for those who have recently graduated from library school.

Commentary

Using Glynn's (2006) Critical Appraisal checklist, the study raises some questions which are highlighted below. This study examined the key factors that can determine successful recruitment and also aid job-seeking librarians in deciding what to focus on in an application and what to prepare for in an interview. The analyses revealed that certain key factors have a particularly positive impact on the hiring process, and hence the main findings fulfilled the stated objectives of the investigation. Nevertheless, the study does have some weaknesses.

The study was based on 242 respondents, but it is not clear how many people actually received the questionnaire. The results were presented only in figures combined with the questions, and it would have been helpful for the readers if the entire data collection instrument had been presented as an appendix. Including the questionnaire also would have facilitated interpretation of the authors' statement about how the respondents' comments aided the study. The article's presentation of the figures directly following the related survey questions in the text was also inconsistent. Thus, reading the survey findings section was difficult.

This study does provide additional information about key factors that promote successful selection of new staff, but the authors could have extended the survey questions to include a broader perception of the hiring process. For example, the authors' concluding remark in the literature review section indicates that it is critical to recruit and retain competent staff in order to support the requirements of teaching, learning, and research, and therefore search committees need to re-examine the hiring process. Questions aligned with this statement were lacking in the survey. Thus, it is difficult to determine how representative the results are of the studied group and the results cannot entirely be generalized. One should also keep in mind that the setting is limited to the U.S., where the hiring and tenure-track processes

differ compared to many other countries. The authors could have included some background information on how the hiring and tenure-track processes work in academic libraries in the U.S. In the conclusion section, the authors assert that search committees should adjust their procedures to meet the needs of the institution, but this was not fully explored in the survey. For instance, is the institution's or the library's mission statement or vision taken into consideration as a context for the hiring process? It is not evident whether the question of a candidate's potential "departmental fit" is derived from the needs of the institution. Yet, according to the authors, this is an important component in the hiring process, as more than 9 out of 10 said that potential fit was extremely important. Thus, based on the literature review, the authors could have created more in-depth questions related to the institution's or the library's goals and mission statement with the aim of gaining more extensive knowledge about the hiring process. The authors state that the hiring process is too long, but it is not clear why the respondents had this perception. The context for these statements is lacking. It is not demonstrated which type of libraries had this perception.

Finally, the authors conclude that 90% of the respondents viewed "demonstrated performance of job requirements" as most important, but the survey shows 58.68%. "Potential fit to the department" scored higher, 60.74%. Thus, the authors' conclusion is not aligned with the survey findings.

This study sheds light on existing practical factors that are highly important because they can facilitate the hiring process for both the search committees and for candidates applying for available positions. However, the following question remains: How can search committees re-examine the hiring process to meet the needs of their institutions?

References

- Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech, 24*(3), 387-399.