

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

February 11, 2005

chronicle.com

## Advice

### Courting Elusive Candidates

By Jean Dowdall

“Applicant pools for top administrative posts are shrinking,” according to a recent article in *The Chronicle*. It reported that intensive recruiting efforts are often needed to attract strong prospects to consider a particular position and to accept it once offered.

As a search consultant, I think those claims are probably true. But I hope someone will do the systematic research to support them, and find out whether candidate pools are smaller lately because weak candidates aren’t applying or because strong ones aren’t.

If the pools are simply missing some of the weak applicants who used to submit résumés for positions they were wildly unqualified for, then the smaller total number of candidates is no cause for concern. But if the pools are missing some of the stronger candidates, or if some strong candidates are declining to accept administrative offers — forcing institutions to appoint weaker candidates instead — then we do have a serious problem to confront.

If your institution is finding it harder to identify and attract good candidates, what can you do to make sure your search is successful? Let me outline some steps:

The search has to be “active” rather than “passive.” That means you have to go out and look for candidates, and you have to determine each person’s potential strength and fit.

Committees often imagine that the great appeal of their institution and the position they are filling will easily attract strong candidates. In fact, there are strong potential candidates out there who may never have heard of your college, or may think they have no interest in a campus like yours. A good search consultant will track down such candidates, and a search committee working without a consultant should do the same, trying to persuade prospects to take a closer look.

While you are actively recruiting candidates, you should simultaneously be evaluating them to be sure they are really the individuals you want.

Take care of your candidates. You need to build a relationship with each of the candidates, even the weak ones, although your relationship with the strong ones should obviously be deeper.

Every few months, a letter or a column appears in *The Chronicle* from a job candidate expressing outrage at the shabby treatment he or she has received at the hands of a committee or a consultant. Candidates describe the roller-coaster ride of a committee’s eager interest, followed by a long period of silence, then urgent requests for additional information or an interview, followed again by a long silence — and perhaps no final concluding communication at all.

Candidates need to understand the rhythm of a search and what is likely to occur during each phase of it, but committees also need to understand a candidate’s anxiety and confusion — either or both of which can easily lead them to withdrawal from the process.

Just the other day, a very strong candidate told me that she went home after her interview thinking of all the reasons we were likely to reject her. In fact, her interview had been terrific.

If you want a good outcome for your search, stay in touch with your candidates. You may decide to send the weak candidates a form letter and contact the strong ones by telephone, but they all should be kept reasonably well informed, both during the process and at its conclusion.

The image of your institution can be seriously harmed if the committee is perceived as treating candidates poorly. After a committee search fails and consultants are asked to step in, we often talk to prospects who refuse to become candidates again.

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

February 11, 2005

chronicle.com

Some decline because they feel that they were mistreated in the first search, and others decline because they heard that applicants were mistreated.

Cultivate strong prospects. What if you identify the ideal candidate but he or she has no interest in making a move? Don't give up just yet. Find someone whom the candidate knows or respects and have that person call the prospect. Or get the search consultant or a member of the committee to visit the prospect at home or in a neutral location to make the case about why the job would be a perfect fit.

Pay attention to candidates' concerns. If the search process you are using makes a candidate uneasy (for example, maybe the committee wants to make reference calls too early in the process), find ways to accommodate the candidate's particular needs. If candidates or their spouses have questions about the institution or the position, have someone call them who is in a position to answer their questions.

Provide opportunities outside the formal search process for additional contacts with committee members or other institutional leaders (such as board members, the president or other senior officers, faculty leaders). Such contacts are opportunities to refine the mutual judgment of candidate and campus about fit, as well as a chance to build a bond that will make the favored candidate more likely to accept an offer.

Finally, be sure that you know the candidates' expectations regarding the compensation package, starting date, spousal issues, place of residence, and other issues so that problems can be addressed before the search concludes.

Keep your search moving along briskly. Set a schedule at the start of the search and try to stick to it. Recognize that once you start to call references and hold campus interviews, candidates are at great risk of damage in their current position. Show them the respect of moving promptly to a decision.

Delaying the final selection increases the risk that another search will grab your favorite candidate, or that the momentum will be lost and candidates will decide that, on balance, they'd just as soon stay where they are.

Anticipate the last-minute surprise. The surprise that most people

look for comes in the way of a counteroffer from your finalist's current institution. But there are other potential surprises, too.

The one that drives me wild is the one that should have been anticipated — for example, the candidate who says at the end of months of discussion that he can't move because his son is going to be a senior in high school. Or the candidate who says that her husband doesn't want to live in southern Indiana: Did he not notice earlier in the process that the job was in Indiana?

Such last-minute excuses are usually evasions that mask the real reason for declining a position, but they are galling nonetheless. Try to smoke out all of those concerns and deal with them early in the process.

The escalating expectations of search committees may be contributing to their difficulties in attracting a good pool of candidates. If you are working on a senior administrative search, take a careful look at your committee and see if some of your approaches should be re-examined:

- Search committees seem to be seeking candidates with an increasingly demanding mix of accomplishments and characteristics. In a presidency, for example, the skills of external relations, and especially fund raising, have become absolutely essential. But the position of chief academic officer, from which most presidents come, rarely provides an opportunity to build that kind of experience. Presidential-search committees should be prepared to consider "proxy" skills if their candidates have had little or no opportunity to raise money or build relationships in the external community.
- Search committees routinely seek candidates with substantial experience because that gives them confidence that a candidate can do the job. But some committees don't like to see candidates over "a certain age." Sure, an older candidate may leave a job in five years to retire, but a younger one could leave in five years to take a more attractive position. Committees should try to avoid making unfounded assumptions about a candidate's age and likely tenure on the job.
- Some committees fail to grasp the preferences of the board or the president, and thus may drop candidates whom the

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

February 11, 2005

chronicle.com

appointing officer or body would have preferred. Make sure the committee has a clear charge that describes the characteristics of an ideal candidate and the central expectations of the position. I've seen searches in which the president wants leadership to move the institution to the next level, but most committee members are quite happy with the level they are at.

- Some committees have difficulty working through their differences. When one or two committee members passionately oppose a candidate favored by others, the candidate may be dropped and attention turned instead to a weaker candidate whom no one opposes. Committee chairs should think through those difficult elements of the search process and be prepared to provide leadership.

We still need to know whether candidate pools are actually shrinking, and why. But until we know, there is a lot that institutions can do to make sure that their search will be successful.

*Jean Dowdall is a vice president of Witt/Kieffer, a search firm serving higher-education, health-care, and other nonprofit organizations. She specializes in searches for presidents, vice presidents, and deans in colleges, universities, and foundations.*

*The Chronicle of Higher Education. Reprinted with permission.*