



The Five-Minute Mentor: How Long Should a Search Take?

I am the head of the search committee for a new department chair. The associate dean who formed the committee wants to put us on an accelerated schedule for finding a new chair, as a number of reorganizations are set to take effect in just a few months and the dean wants all department chairs in place by then. We have already engaged a search firm to help us. Is this time frame feasible?

Talk about the perfect makings for an urban legend! I've heard of academic chair searches that take two years to complete. Thankfully, that's not my frame of reference, and I have a theory as to why we have been successful in this arena. Let's use the case of a recent search for a chair of surgery at the School of Medicine at University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC) in Jackson.

With an aggressive three-month completion timeline, I initially thought it was an impossible feat based on work already done internally. But I was up for the challenge. To help expedite the process, Daniel W. Jones, MD, Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs, Dean of the School of Medicine and Herbert G. Langford Professor of Medicine, had assigned Martin McMullan, MD, Senior Advisor for Clinical Affairs, to be my internal partner on the search. Here are several criteria we used.

Criterion 1: Partner Actively

Be an active partner with your clients; this will considerably shorten the search time. Identify an "internal expert," who works hand-in-hand with the search firm consultant to market the position.

My April 2007 site visit to UMMC included meetings with the search committee and other key decision makers: Dr. Jones; Will Ferniany, PhD, CEO of the University Hospitals and Health System; and Robert Galli, MD, Professor of Emergency Medicine, Chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine, and chair of the search committee. In addition, I sat down with the director of public affairs, who had been at the university for many years, and provided

excellent insight into the university and the renowned history of the Department of Surgery at UMMC.

With the information I'd collected from those one-on-one sessions, Dr. McMullan, my internal consultant, and I came up with a search strategy. Armed with information, Dr. McMullan already had done research through his national surgical society network to identify about 80 surgeons across the nation who had the credentials to fill the surgery chair at UMMC.

Criterion 2: Do Your Homework

Thorough research will enable you to create a solid search strategy that pinpoints your audience.

As a next step, Tyler & Company sent a package to the workplaces of 51 potential candidates. Materials included were a letter from me describing the opportunity; a DVD featuring UMMC and the School of Medicine; and other collaterals. Hallie Banker, my Tyler & Company senior researcher on the project, followed up with phone calls and e-mails to each of these individuals. During this sourcing process, we received six additional names of potential candidates, and we sent them packages as well.

Some candidates possessed the skills set we sought, but had wavering interest. So why not send more information about the Department of Surgery, including faculty bios? And how about including Chamber of Commerce information? For extra authenticity, these latter packets were sent from Dr. McMullan's office. In addition, the few candidates who were "on the fence" about the position received a personal phone call from either Dr. McMullan or me.

Criterion 3: Go the Extra Mile

Go the distance in the effort to recruit top talent. Find what appeals to your audience and deliver via expedited mail, e-mail, or the old-fashioned phone call.

Through our coordinated effort, I was able to present a long list of highly qualified candidates to the search committee within a

few weeks. The list presentation was comprised of candidate CVs, plus a summary sheet highlighting qualifying experience and personal motivation to pursue the opportunity, all of which was gathered through phone interviews. We were now one month into the search and our timeline. During the meeting, the search committee selected candidates for me to personally interview. I met with 11 candidates who could meet the tight schedule, and our team submitted complete dossiers to the committee. These were comprised of the candidate's CV, my interview summary, compensation information, a personality profile, references and results of a background check.

Criterion 4: Stay on Target

Always keep your presentation date in mind.

From May through mid-June, UMMC interviewed 10 candidates for a first interview on campus. By early July, the finalists returned with their spouses (if applicable) for additional meetings. After a search committee meeting on July 12, the committee presented three top candidates to the dean, and he made a decision less than a week later. The appointment was announced on July 23.

Criterion 5: Coordinate Interviews Quickly

Coordinate your first and second interviews with the client quickly. Don't lose momentum.

From my perspective, this was an amazing search. It epitomized the concept of partnership between the search consultant and the client, and although it was a lot of work, it was tremendously exciting watching the search unfold from concept to quality candidate recruitment to completion in record time.

It is interesting to note that after the search was complete, I received a call from one of the candidates who previously had declined the opportunity and now wanted to be considered. To hear the shock in his

voice when he learned the position already had been filled made my day!

Even though good timing is a significant contributor to a successful search, service must be right up there, as seen in our next criterion.

Criterion 6: Roll Out the Red Carpet

It is important to follow UMMC's model of rolling out the red carpet not only to the candidate, but also to his or her spouse when both come for a visit. Interviews are a two-way street.

My goal for every search is to give the client the "option to hire" from a slate

of qualified individuals who are a cultural fit for the organization. This "option" becomes a reality when the search is well run and done with the full engagement of all interested parties. Although the thought of selling/marketing the opportunity may seem crass to the purist academic, the "war for talent," as often referred to in major newspapers and professional journals, is real.

Large companies devote huge financial resources to talent management and acquisition. Based on the future needs for leaders in medical education, lessons can be learned from big businesses who proactively market their organization in their search for talented job candidates.

Criterion 7: Good PR and Marketing Are Key

Good public relations and effective marketing go a long way in not only establishing the look, feel, and positioning of an organization (among other things), but also in attracting talent.

So with these lucky seven criteria, I have proved that accelerating an academic search while not sacrificing quality is possible. Maybe you won't see this on snopes.com, but I'm ready to declare "Myth busted!"

—**Patricia A. Hoffmeir**
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