

Using an executive search firm to fill faculty library positions

One library's story

by Marcia Stockham, Ron Ratliff, and Jean Darbyshire

Traditionally, filling faculty positions at Kansas State University Libraries (KSUL) has involved appointing a selection committee, coordinating everyone's calendars for meeting times, and sifting through résumés and cover letters. The process could take months by the time applicants were screened, references called, and candidates invited for an interview. It wasn't unusual to lose good candidates to other universities or to close searches with no hires, in part because of the slow process.

In early 2001 following strategic planning, KSUL needed to fill five faculty positions. Given that the process of hiring one position can be quite time consuming, let alone five; that the pool of prospective candidates is limited; and that two searches had been closed because of a lack of qualified applicants, library administrators decided to try a new approach. The library turned to an executive search firm, The Morley Group,¹ to help fill positions.

Using an executive search firm

When the executive search firm was hired, a number of traditional procedures changed. In consultation with the firm, the library drew up a position description and a blueprint that included a list of position specifications, qualifying criteria, and open-ended questions. The candidates were required to address each point and

answer the questions on the blueprint, which probed their qualifications. (The firm recently received approval for copyright of this blueprinting process.)

The search firm recruited prospective candidates, either from names the library submitted or from the firm's own resources, which included researching similar institutions, cold calls, and soliciting applications over the Web. Once contact was made with an interested person, a résumé was requested and representatives of the firm conducted a short phone interview. If the candidate appeared to be qualified and was still interested in the position, he or she was asked to complete the blueprint response. The search firm worked with the candidate to answer any questions about the position or the process, and contacted the candidate's references.

The search firm then forwarded the completed blueprint response, résumé, and transcript of reference calls to the library. The materials were distributed to the faculty recruitment committee, deans, department heads, and members of the affected department for review. The recruitment committee consisted of four to six faculty from different departments of the library and was selected by the dean. The committee had 24 hours to look over the materials, which dictated the process move quickly. Generally, the committee read the paperwork, for-

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warded comments via e-mail to the facilitator for summarizing, and decided whether to recommend to the administration that the applicant be invited to interview. The dean, after consultation, made the final decision about the invitation to interview. This process did not allow for comparison of candidates to each other, but rather, determined whether an individual met the minimum qualifications for the job. If the candidate was acceptable, he or she was invited for an interview. If not, the search firm was notified and was asked for the next candidate.

Candidate interviews remained similar to those held before using the search firm. The recruitment committee participated in the process, and also did much of the planning to ensure the day went smoothly. For instance, the committee coordinated a reception where anyone from the entire staff could meet and ask questions of the candidate. At least two members accompanied the candidate to meals. There were also opportunities for the candidate to meet with administration and the members of the relevant department. After the interview, the committee had 24 hours to come to a consensus about the candidate and make a recommendation to hire or not to hire, listing strengths and weaknesses. This information was forwarded to the administration along with recommendations from various groups participating in the interview process. The dean made the final decision about whether or not to offer the position to the candidate.

One candidate's experience

Initial contact from the Morley Group was a cold call from one of its representatives. The firm located names on library Web pages and called individuals to find further leads for prospective candidates. In this case the candidate, by coincidence, was relocating to the Kansas State University area, and even though not currently in the job market, agreed to look at the positions available. After seeing one position that looked like a potential fit, the representative encouraged the interested party to send a résumé to the firm via e-mail. After initial screening of the résumé, a complete blueprint and background information on KSUL was sent to the prospective applicant. The firm representative then conducted a telephone interview, which gave the applicant an opportunity to expand on specific points of the résumé and an-

swer general questions. At that point, the applicant was asked to complete the blueprint response. This initial process proceeded very quickly because the same representative handled all aspects of the transactions, and all exchanges were done electronically or via the telephone.

Completing the blueprint response required a good deal of time and careful thought. It was a very useful tool to refine and organize thoughts and look realistically at strengths, weaknesses, experiences, and ideas. The process allowed reflection and was good preparation for the eventual interview. Besides providing the opportunity for the applicant to answer questions, the blueprint served as a stimulus for the candidate to formulate questions about the position. The finished document functioned as a pre-interview and was much more thorough than the usual cover letter and résumé. Once the blueprint was completed, the search firm reviewed it, sent the paperwork to the library, and asked for references.

The candidate's overall positive experience with the search firm was due to several factors. First, the same representative was used for all contacts and was very good about answering the applicant's questions or supplying additional information. All transactions were completed via the telephone or e-mail, which made the process move quickly. The representative continued to provide information and feedback to the candidate up to and including the point of signing a contract with the library.

Conclusion

Over the course of several months KSUL filled all five positions and continues to use the search firm for hiring faculty. A major advantage to using the executive search firm is the amount of time it saves the library staff. The firm recruits candidates, reviews applications, screens out unqualified candidates, conducts reference interviews, and provides continuing communication with the applicant.

Other advantages include: providing complete application information at one time (résumé, blueprint response, reference interview responses); recruiting techniques that may result in larger and more diverse pools of candidates; using the analytical approach of the blueprint that may result in a better fit of the candidate to the position; quick turn-around time, which may result in fewer losses of good candidates; and serving as an objective reviewer and source of information for internal

candidates. An executive search firm takes a proactive approach, which may be more aggressive in seeking talent. It can make contacts where the library cannot, often resulting in the desired outcome of a more diverse workplace.

One of the major perceived negative aspects of using a search firm is that library staff are not allowed to compare candidates. Credentials and blueprint responses for only one candidate at a time were given to the library, and the candidate was evaluated on how well his or her qualifications, knowledge, skills, and abilities fit the blueprint criteria. If the first candidate met the criteria, the interview reinforced the paperwork, and the consensus was that the candidate would be a good fit for the position, he or she generally received an offer. If the consensus was that the candidate did not meet the qualifications, he or she was rejected and the search firm was asked for another candidate. This was a major change from the way hiring had been done before, and it took the staff time to adjust.

The library staff identified several other aspects of the process that may be considered disadvantages as well. First, recruitment seems

to be geared towards candidates with some experience, so the number of entry-level candidates may be reduced, even though several of the positions filled were considered entry-level. The quick turnaround time for candidate review moves the process along, but can also be difficult for some library staff to adjust to because it is not always easy to drop other projects or daily tasks in order to review the paperwork of an applicant. The recruitment committee and other library staff must still make local arrangements for interviews. And, finally, the cost of such a service may be prohibitive for many libraries, and warrants careful weighing of benefits against the expense of using a firm.

Overall, the use of an executive search firm was beneficial to KSUL in that it not only saved staff time and resources, but allowed us to find and hire qualified candidates. The time taken to develop the appropriate position description and blueprint questions resulted in a good fit with candidate and position.

Note

1. Visit The Morley Group at <http://www.themorleygroup.com> for more information. ■

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