Lessons Learned: Sharing Staff Screening Setbacks



By Erin Gloeckner

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A few years ago I had an opportunity to expand my role by co-managing the hiring process for two openings on the NRMC team. Looking back on it, I was pretty darn lucky to experience such ideal results from my first foray into hiring. Not every hire turns out so well, and there are important lessons every nonprofit leader can learn from their screening and hiring experiences. Reflect on these 'lessons learned' to avoid common staff screening setbacks when searching for your next colleague.

1. **Hiring Yourself**: Joel Peterson, chairman of JetBlue Airlines warns that it's easy to hire a person who thinks like you, talks like you, went to the same college as you, etc. Similarities allow candidates to connect with hiring staff, which makes a positive impression. Recognizing a candidate's similarities to your own also feeds your ego, and causes some hiring staff to impose their own successes or work histories onto their hiring decisions. Don't allow your personal bias to influence your next big hire. It's possible that the familiar assets you're focusing on are covering up a quality that make the candidate a poor fit for the position. It's also unwise to hire a homogenous population, or to repeatedly hire similar candidates for a role that has suffered turnover time and again. Invite people with different perspectives into your team, and take the risk that your new hires will advance your mission by challenging the status quo. (www.gsb.stanford.edu/news/headlines/joel-peterson-what-are-most-common-hiring-mistakes)
2. **Failing to Understand Why People Fail at a Job**: Before hiring a new staff member to an existing position, consider why the previous employee failed or left the job. Recognizing failure points allows you to redesign the position description or to screen out candidates who are more likely to commit the same mistakes. Resolve to use exit interviews to understand why staff members leave your organization. Information gleaned from an exit interview will help you understand the job from the departing employee's perspective. Exit interview information can also help you make changes in organization-wide policy and practice to increase collaboration, strengthen on-boarding, and create a culture and environment where staff feel valued and challenged.
3. **Rushing the Process or Skipping Steps**: A terribly common hiring mistake is rushing the process. You are in need of a development leader *right now*, but taking your sweet time with screening results could give you access to a stronger candidate pool and a better fitting employee in the end. Similar to rushing, skipping steps in the screening process can be disastrous. Too many hiring teams start in the middle of the process rather than at the beginning — it's easy to jump ahead into applications and interviews, but first ensure those steps relate to the position in question. Take the time to create or revamp a position description that is customized to the skills and qualifications you need in a colleague. The position description is the holy grail of screening — your entire screening process should be built around that

document.

4. **Refusing to Learn from Your Hiring Mistakes**: If you've ever experienced a 'bad hire,' sit down and reflect on the root of the failure. Public entity leaders and hiring managers might say, "We never saw it coming!" after learning that a colleague embezzled funds from the organization. But there's a chance that you *might* have been able to see it coming during the screening process. If an employee turns out to be a poor fit for his or her role, dig deep to identify gaps or red flags in the screening process. Did you hire too hastily? Did you skip reference checks since the candidate was a longtime friend of the entity director? Did you assume that a clean background check meant the candidate posed no future risks of misconduct? Did you fail to base application and interview questions on the essential goals described in the position description? Aim to continually improve your screening process by reflecting on your good, bad, and ugly hires.
5. **Failing to Provide Sufficient Support during Onboarding**: Sometimes after hiring a candidate, you realize that person is not well suited to his or her role. Unfortunately, some new staff members will never succeed in adapting to their new responsibilities. But before throwing in the towel and letting your new hire go, have a conversation with him or her about performance. It's possible that your onboarding program or training opportunities were insufficient in preparing the employee to meet your expectations. Consider whether the employee has the potential to succeed if given more training or support in his or her role. Employment is a two-way street; if employees are expected to excel and give back to the organization, then entity leaders must foster an atmosphere in which that is possible.

If you prefer to revamp your screening process from the comfort of your own office, look forward to our brand new book, Staff Screening Notebook, coming this September. This new book features a 10-Step guide to screening and a historical perspective on the evolution of the screening process, leading to today's best practices for staff screening and hiring.

Erin Gloeckner is the former Director of Consulting Services at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.