

Top 10 Tips for Running a Good Nonprofit Hiring Process

Any hiring process takes thoughtful planning. But for nonprofit organizations, which often face time and money constraints, and whose staff are highly driven by passion and commitment to a cause, the planning process takes on new meaning. It becomes even more important in this type of environment to ensure that the hiring process is done efficiently, and reaps the best candidates for the senior roles that nonprofits seek to fill.

To explore how to run a good process, we spoke to Tom Friel, retired chairman and chief executive officer of [Heidrick & Struggles International, Inc.](#) Friel is a senior advisor to Bridgestar and The Bridgespan Group, and a longtime nonprofit board member. Here he shares his top 10 tips on running a hiring process.

1. Assess your existing team and talent against the mission.

The process of hiring a senior person is time-consuming and often expensive, so understanding what talent already exists on your team can provide an important lens into what your organization really needs. “A lot of organizations hire for a perceived need without doing it against the background of understanding what the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and the staff are, particularly against that need,” Friel said. Failure to do an assessment can lead an organization to hire for skills it might already have or for abilities that are not as critical to the organization.

2. Determine whether you can meet the need by promoting someone or changing job descriptions.

“All good organizations look to promote first before they look to hire; it’s smart business, it’s good for morale, and it’s cost effective,” said Friel. However, as organizations get bigger, promoting gets more difficult. “The bigger the organization gets, the more likely that the talent will get

Hiring Process Checklist

- Assess existing team and talent against organization’s need
- Determine whether promotion or job description change could meet the need
- Create a realistic compensation and benefits plan
- Create a list of “must-have” skills and characteristics
- Create a list of “nice-to-have” skills and characteristics
- Create a list of selling points for the position
- Establish a search strategy
- Determine who will be involved in the search
- Stay flexible during the candidate review process
- Say thank you to all who participated in the search

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hidden away,” said Friel. Organizations can lose track of “young stars” or department heads may not be willing to give up exceptional talent. “In a good organization, you look across the organization and move people around to their greatest need, and you give people opportunities to get promoted.”

3. Create a realistic compensation and benefits package.

“Never say, ‘We’ll pay what it takes to get the right person’— that’s nonsensical,” Friel warned. Instead, set a top limit, and then explore other, non-monetary opportunities that could help you attract the best candidates. “Force your organization to be clear and precise,” Friel said. If your organization feels challenged by what it can offer in salary, there are a number of ways you can deal with compensation apart from absolute salaries and/or bonuses. “There are benefits that have great value to a candidate,” he added. The ability to work from home once or twice a week, daycare, extra vacation time, and education assistance are just a few of the options nonprofits can offer. Even openly stating that a candidate will have the flexibility to earn additional income doing something apart from his or her job can be a benefit. One such opportunity could be allowing an employee to join a for-profit board or to do some consulting for which s/he could get paid.

Be creative in how your organization deals with gaps in salary. “The key to a successful negotiation is to find something that has great perceived value to one party and low perceived cost to the other, and give them that with great fanfare,” Friel said.

4. Agree on “must-haves.”

You have “CPA required” for the role you wish to fill, but is a CPA really necessary? “If this question gets answered with two paragraphs of explanation, it’s really not required, it’s desired,” Friel said. Stress the point that your organization needs to come to clarity on what is required, what is highly desired, and what is just nice to have.

Add to this part of the process an “acid test.” Determine those few, absolute must-have experiences or capabilities, and then agree with the team that these are no-compromise items. “These must-haves become the three or four things that your team or recruiter can use as absolute filters to take a big bunch of resumes down to 50,” Friel said. The list of must-haves should be small—three, four, or five—according to Friel. They can be degrees, compensation ranges, etc., but they need to be thoughtfully chosen, as they will serve to help your organization filter candidate resumes into A and B piles. “There might be some wonderful people in the B pile, and if you’re screening them out on things that aren’t critical, then you’ve made the wrong choice on one of these acid test items, and you have compromised the search,” warned Friel.

5. Next, create a “nice-to-have” list.

What other qualifications does your organization feel will make candidates an asset, but which aren't critical capabilities? This second list will provide another filter with which to screen candidates and help your team reach consensus on what and who it really needs.

6. Sell the sizzle, not the steak.

Now that you know what you want in a candidate, you have to make great candidates want to apply for the position. Create a list of selling points and test it on someone objective from outside the organization. “There's an old adage, sell the sizzle not the steak,” said Friel. “When you deal with a good car salesman, they're not talking about the features of the car; they're talking about how you're going to feel about yourself in that car,” he added. “Until someone makes a feature real and personal, it doesn't have any value.” “This also is where an organization has to project its passion about its mission among other things,” said Friel.

In creating this list, ask yourself:

- What would a great candidate want, and can we provide it?
- What might be frustrations that candidates are feeling in their current roles or with their current organizations?
- How might our opportunity address those frustrations?
- What can make this opportunity stand out among others the best candidates might see?

“Clearly, hiring someone isn't all about selling; it's about evaluating candidates against the mission as well,” Friel said. “But the best jobs and best hiring is done when an organization is really tough on qualifications, which means you're only looking at really good candidates who probably aren't desperate for this job. Then you have to find a way to convince the best candidate that he's the one you need to hire, for a position only he can really fit,” Friel added. “That's pure selling.”

Warned Friel, “You can always come back to things to evaluate, but if you didn't make the sale, you won't have the opportunity to go back, they're gone—once you stop selling, your opportunity to do any more evaluating is over.”

7. Establish a search strategy, budget, and timeline.

How are you going to find the best candidates? Will you advertise in newspapers, use job boards, leverage personal networks, and/or recruiters? If your organization will handle recruiting internally,

determine how much time it will take and who will be involved in the process, and then calculate how much it might cost to engage those internal people in the process. The sooner your organization can establish a strategy for finding the best candidates, the sooner you can budget time and money for the process.

In the case of a timeline, Friel said it can take about 90 days to find and close the right candidate for a senior-level position at a nonprofit. “It could be 45 days on the low end if you get lucky fast, and it even could be six months if you don’t,” he added.

8. Determine who will interview candidates and to what end.

Oftentimes organizations are unclear about what roles current staff will play during the interview process. “A candidate comes in and she interviews with five people, all of whom ask her the same questions. Or all of whom sell the organization and ask her no questions,” Friel said. Besides frustrating the candidate, this type of inattention to process can result in hiring the wrong person for the job.

When assembling an interview team, be sure to be clear about the time commitment individuals will need to make and their roles in the process.

For instance, determine:

- What are the team members being asked to do? Express opinion, play an advisory role, sell the organization?
- Who on the team will be part of the decision-making process when it comes time to choose a candidate?
- Who will negotiate and close?
- Who will manage the process and communication with the team and with the candidates?

If four or five people are interviewing, it is important that the core interview team commit to interviewing every serious candidate so there are fair comparisons. “If you’re going to be part of the process, you need to be available and committed to see all candidates,” said Friel. “And everyone on the team should have something specific to do to avoid redundancy.”

9. Stay flexible...not everything goes according to plan!

As important as good planning is, recruiting is a very human process, often influenced by many unpredictable factors. Some can help you, as when the perfect candidate appears early and is an

easy sell. Some will hurt, such as a long negotiation that falls apart for unforeseeable or trivial reasons. It's important to keep a sense of balance and even a sense of humor. You can't control everything. Stay flexible, but keep everyone focused on the goal, not the frustrations of the process. In the end you'll get it done.

10. When the search is completed and announced, close it out professionally. Say thank you to those who helped and to the candidates who weren't chosen. "You may want to go back to both in the future," said Friel. A well-conducted search should make the organization friends, not enemies.

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