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The Politics of Hiring

Determining which job applicant to hire can be a complex decision. It can be difficult to ascertain in two or three interviews whether or not someone possesses the right qualifications or work style for the team. As a result, managers frequently seek additional input from others in the department

or company. While obtaining a wider range of insights can be useful, you can overly complicate the hiring process if you're not careful.

When numerous people are involved in deciding who should fill a job opening, it can become a political battle. Some participants may insist that applicants meet certain criteria—possess the database expertise required for a specific accounting project they are overseeing, for instance—while others may have different motivations, such as choosing someone who is a personality fit. Emotions can come into play, making it difficult for everyone to agree on the best person for the job.

Overcoming the politics of hiring requires planning your recruitment and selection process with great care. Here are some critical steps that can help to

ensure everything goes as smoothly as possible.

Define your needs

First, develop a thorough job description that details the skills, education, and experience required. Also take into account the potential career path for someone assuming the role—for example, a senior accountant position may be designed to prepare someone to even-



tually become a manager.

The entire team involved in the hiring process should offer input at this early stage. Specific questions to be discussed might include: What qualifications are essential, and which are simply preferred? Is the position, as described, doable? Will you need to look outside the firm for applicants, or are there people within the organization who might be appropriate candidates?

Try to allow for some degree of flexibility with the hiring criteria. If you exclude applicants who lack one of your “preferred” qualifications, you might overlook talented individuals who would otherwise make excellent employees.

Be sure that everyone involved thinks long term. While you may have an immediate need for someone to help the firm integrate an acquired company’s accounting systems with your own, the skill set may not be required a year from now. Consider whether the responsibilities should be assigned to the position for which you are hiring or to another role, such as an information technology professional on staff or a consultant.

Establish an effective team structure

Once the job description has been developed, one person in the group should be given the authority for directing the hiring process—typically the department head or the individual who would manage the new hire. When serving in this capacity on the team, you should solicit the opinions of those involved but maintain sole responsibility for the final decision. Schedule interviews for applicants with others on the team, and then filter through all of the information collected to make an objective analysis based on the perceived positives and negatives of each applicant.

It’s important for one individual to have final say. If everyone in the group is given equal power in the process, the candidate selected will be the one who is least objectionable—someone who didn’t generate strong feelings one way or the other among participants during interviews. This is rarely the best hire.

Manage referrals appropriately

After recruitment efforts begin, adhere to the agreed-upon job description, particularly when you receive personal recommendations from friends or colleagues who know the perfect person for the job. Referrals can be an excellent way to learn of qualified applicants, but they also can be a source of tension due to political pressures. A member of senior management may have a nephew who has a “knack for numbers,” or a neighbor may know of someone looking to

transition to accounting from an unrelated profession. These may be great applicants, but tread carefully. Make your own decision whether to arrange an introduction, but don’t feel pressured to compromise your hiring criteria.

Keep everyone informed

Make sure employees and senior management receive frequent updates on the status of the hiring process. Let people know, for example, that you interviewed three candidates last week and hope to have a final decision by the end of the month. This will assure them that help is on the way, which will be welcome news if they’ve been carrying a greater workload.

You may not be able to eliminate the office politics associated with hiring, but a thoughtful strategy can minimize its impact on the decision-making process. Develop a clear job description, and follow established guidelines closely as you evaluate applicants. Not only will you prevent potential conflicts, but you’ll also ensure that the most qualified person is hired. ■

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