

# Workshop: Hiring & Managing a Team

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Organised by Dieter Lukas and Nicholas Horrocks.

**Presented by: Catherine Tilley, Andrea Manica, Ed Turner, and Liz MacRae.**

## **CATHERINE TILLEY, DIRECTOR AT CAMBRIDGE INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP**

### **Background**

- Worked for McKinsey & Company (consultancy) for 14 years.
- Has led teams of up to 100 researchers.
- Experience of interviewing hundreds of candidates.

## **ANDREA MANICA, SENIOR GROUP LEADER, DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE**

### **Background**

- Has worked in the Zoology Department for 10 years+.
- Currently has 14 people in his research group.
- Experience of interviewing and hiring both PhDs and postdocs.
- Sits on many recruiting panels and also involved in many lab collaborations that involve managing large numbers of people.

## **ED TURNER, GROUP LEADER, DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE**

### **Background**

- Just starting out in establishing his own research group.
- Currently has one MSc, two PhD students, and one postdoc working for him.
- Has previously worked with the BCN Wildlife Trust where working with and hiring (often unskilled) volunteers was a big part of the job.
- Currently coordinates conservation projects involving many non-scientists that are nonetheless professionals in other industries, based in Malaysia and Indonesia.

## **LIZ McRAE, PRINCIPAL ASSISTANT, DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE**

### **Background**

- Experience mainly in hiring technicians and assistant staff, but has also been on hiring panels for postdocs.
  - Currently getting more involved in HR.
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**What should you look out for during the interview that is not in the job description?**

- Humans are bundles of biases – important to recognise this.
- Two aspects to look for: technical aspects of performing job-related tasks and dealing with people and being part of a team. The two are often not correlated. It is easy to get swayed by people skills during the interview.
- Length of the position is important for determining what the job advert says.
- If the job is to run for a short period (e.g. 6 months), then the person being hired needs exact skills, since they won't have time to learn on the job. For longer contracts, the exact skills a candidate has may be less important, since they can be trained and there is more time for the applicant to learn.
- This means it is important to think about essential versus desirable skills for a job position. Your advert leads you to being prepared to be less biased and less nervous when interviewing candidates.
- There should not be too many essential skills listed, but make sure they capture the key features of the position.
- Often you need someone to fit into an existing team, so desirable skills might need to be those that are complementary to those possessed by existing team members.
- It is important to think about what a candidate can learn on the job, compared to the skills they need to have in advance. For longer jobs, you might want someone who you can think with about new challenges.
- Depending on the particular job, it might be possible to set some kind of test to better assess the skills of candidates. This might be more appropriate for technical positions than e.g. postdoc roles.
- In addition to allowing you to see how good a candidate is, this also gives them a chance to see what the job will really be like.
- It is always important to make it clear to an applicant what the job is that they are applying for. Often, the candidate's impression of the job they are applying for and the reality can be different, so you need to make sure this is not the case.

**Managing the interview process.**

- Try to 'debias' questions. This works best by having formalized process.
- Be specific in what you ask – "Tell me about a time when you did this..."
- Balance the interview panel. If you have little interview experience, then ask someone more experienced to sit in with you. Try to balance by gender too. Try to get the atmosphere right.
- Try out interview questions on practice candidates – for example someone who already does a similar job to the one you are hiring for. If they don't understand the question that you are asking, even though they are already doing the job, then you probably need to rephrase the question.
- Be very clear about the interview and hiring process. Such 'process' questions can be a good way to make sure the candidate is clear about what is going on, and what they can expect from you.

- Ask the candidate if they have questions for you.
- Collect data on candidates as you go along. For example, write up notes on each candidate after the interview has ended (or throughout the interview, if you can do this).
- A standard form is a very good way to make it easier to compare notes on candidates. By using the same format to write notes on each candidate and scoring set criteria you can help to avoid biases.
- Be honest about what life in the job will be like. Make sure candidates understand this: What could be your concerns in taking this position? What have you understood about this job?
- Get candidates to meet other group members as part of the interview process. This allows them a chance to get a more unfiltered view of the work environment, as well as allowing you to get feedback from existing team members. Both parties get an opportunity to see whether a candidate is likely to fit in well or not.
- Do not get swayed by someone standing out because they at least have the minimum expected: better not to hire someone if it still does not fit than to hire under pressure. The short delay in reopening the hiring process is a lot less costly than having to deal with a candidate that is not the right fit.

**Is it OK to hire someone who is over-qualified for a position?**

- For some panel members this was a red flag and might be a problem.
- It can be managed though, depending on the situation.
- Sometimes it might imply that the applicant has their own agenda e.g. will try to do their own research rather than focusing on the job that is too menial for them.
- Ask about career trajectory: why this job at this time? Are they switching fields and therefore fine to work in more technical role (potentially o.k.)? Are they using it as a quick stepping-stone because they have no other job (potential red flag)? How would they manage boredom and frustration?
- In other cases you might be able to use this to your advantage – but perhaps this is a bit exploitative. For example, you could be getting some for a bargain – highly qualified but costly you relatively little.

**Recommendation letters.**

- Always follow up on references – a few phone calls costs nothing compared to hiring the wrong person.
- However, most letters are not worth the paper they are written on, unless you know the person who wrote the letter.
- If you don't personally know the person who has written a reference for an applicant, then try to find someone you do know and trust, who can tell you something honest about the candidate.

- Speaking to people directly on the phone can also be a good way to get a more honest opinion than what is written in a letter. Essentially, you are putting them in front of an audience (yourself), and nobody wants to be accused of 'polluting the water' by falsely promoting a poor candidate.

**When not to hire**

- All panel members agreed that if you are not convinced that you have found the right person for a position then don't compromise on a less-than-suitable candidate. It is much better in the long run to not hire anybody and then re-advertise the position than to hire someone that is not right for the job and you later have to try and get rid of. This will be painful for both you and them.
- False negatives are much better than false positives – it is better to miss the right person than hire the wrong one.

**Telling people they have not been hired.**

- This is never easy to do, and it shouldn't ever become easy.
- Be constructive, and always be polite. You may well meet that person again at some point in the future.
- Treat them as you would expect to be treated.
- A few lines of constructive advice can go a long way to making the whole process easier for the candidate. But be honest.
- It is important to remember that if a candidate was not the right person for the job, then you are also doing them a favour by not employing them. They would only be unhappy and now they can at least look for another job more suited to them.

**Managing a team**

- Often the person you are hiring will have skills that you don't have. This is fine, and is part of why you are hiring them.
- Remember that you are the one doing the hiring though, and you are the one in charge of the team.
- Once you have your own team, inevitably there must be some distinction between you as the boss, and those who work for you.
- Be friendly, but professional.
- Try to keep the hierarchy as flat as possible, but recognise that ultimately you are the one in charge.
- It is fine to socialise and have a drink after work, but keeping your distance is also necessary. Make it clear that the social event is work related.
- Teams form by doing real work.
- Flexibility is important. If you all work late one week, then suggest that people have time off the following week.

- Check for motivation and flexibility during interview (if important for the position): for some roles, people expect 9-5 and you will have to respect this, for other roles flexibility is key and, when clearly communicated, can be part of what is expected of whoever takes the position.
- People take their cue from you, so if you stay late, others will understand that they might be expected to stay late too. Equally, if you leave early, and let people know that you have a life outside of work, they will understand that it is OK (and expected) for them to also leave early sometimes, and have their own life away from the workplace.
- If you don't make it easy for people to approach you with their problems early on, then this will only cause problems later on, when issues become too big to deal with easily.
- Perhaps especially for men, it is important to make a culture of allowing people to feel it is fine to go home to deal with e.g. parenting issues. Again, flexibility is key. Depending on the age of the person, they will likely have different commitments – a young postdoc may be less likely to have family commitments than an older one, for example.
- Clearly managed expectations are essential. It is good to remind people that things don't always need to be done ASAP, and that setting enough time to get things done properly is the way to proceed.
- Make sure you 'manage' yourself.
- Get a mentor to remind you of your strengths and help you work through your weaknesses.
- There is always a risk of difficult people. This says nothing about your own skills and abilities.
- Make sure to differentiate between work issues and personal issues.
- Remind yourself that most people applied because they want to work with you.