

2015

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Recommended Citation

Bugg, K. (2015). Best practices for talent acquisition in 21st-century academic libraries. *Library Leadership & Management*, 29(4).

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Best Practices for Talent Acquisition in 21st-Century Academic Libraries

Kimberley Bugg

A qualified, capable workforce is critical for all professions, including academic libraries. Most academic libraries recognize that the superiority of their resources, services, and value margins is largely an outcome of the quality of their employees. As a result, they recognize the importance of recruiting skilled individuals and devoting tremendous time, effort, and financial resources to employing the right people. To contribute to this effort, many academic libraries develop their own human resources management style to focus on attracting, recruiting, and hiring top candidates.¹ However, developing human capital that is appropriate for a particular library is not an exact science. The art of matching the roles and responsibilities of a library position within an institution of higher education with a potential candidate is a complicated task, especially considering the rapidly shifting priorities of the academic library. For that reason, academic libraries should apply talent acquisition strategies that focus on finding individuals that best fit the organizational culture rather than a particular position.

The increasing emphasis on information technology, the networked global community, and the commodification of electronic access to knowledge has caused libraries, particularly academic ones, to rethink the type of candidate best suited to provide information services. Library administrators such as Staines² and Neal³ suggest that academic libraries should no longer focus on matching duties with experience but rather shift the focus to finding individuals who are both flexible and adaptive. Such individuals would need to display the characteristics required to sustain change and growth appropriate to a particular

organization. The premise is that an individual can learn the duties necessary to fulfill many roles on the job. However, the challenges for the human resources (HR) manager and the managerial leader are identifying what each organization, department, and team needs; characterizing those needs in a job description; and, finally, recruiting the appropriate individual.

Even without considering such a “radical”⁴ approach to finding the right candidates, academic libraries struggle with recruitment. In 2002, the Association of College & Research Libraries⁵ created a task force to investigate how academic libraries might address recruitment—among other workforce issues—in order to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive environment. The taskforce identified several causes of the challenge: aging librarians, lack of succession planning, declining or flattening of Masters of Library Science programs, and increased competition for library-related skills in other industries. Subsequently, the task force created strategies for handling these issues, including marketing through social media, reaching out to good candidates for librarianship, and coaching. While these strategies provide a general approach to recruitment, they do not address all of the issues of recruiting the best candidates to academic libraries.

In order to attract the most qualified individuals, academic libraries should rely on talent acquisition strategies that use more than applications and interviews to secure the best talent. In a post on the *Deloitte Blog* on February 7, 2012, Robin Erickson defines talent acquisition as a “strategic approach to identifying, attracting, and onboarding top talent to efficiently and effectively meet dynamic business needs.”⁶ Talent acquisition is often a multi-layered process, and the use of best practices would allow the profession to strategically strengthen its approach to attracting new talent while allowing individual academic libraries to customize the experience at the local level. Talent acquisition shifts the focus away from recruiting as the scope of candidate selection and instead centers on developing the right

candidates for an organization as an on-going process that occurs before and after a person is hired.

The available business literature on the topic consists of quite a few variations of talent acquisition best practices.^{7,8,9} Collectively, the literature uses a variety of terms to describe four key activities that libraries can adopt as best practices for high-impact talent acquisition:

- Strategic planning (preparing)
- Building an attractive organization (branding)
- Forming talent communities (pipelining)
- Developing a holistic candidate experience

Strategic planning

Developing a talent acquisition process to attract the top talent should fall within the strategic mission of the academic library;¹⁰ it should be embraced by the entire library and require active involvement of all library staff. Before implementing best practices for talent acquisition, organizations should work to clarify the role of the HR manager and the managerial leader. Talent acquisition is not the work of the HR manager or the managerial leader alone; instead, it is a collaborative effort that requires individuals to work closely together to understand the needs of each team or department in the organization. Srivastava and Bhatnagar found that talent acquisition is most effective when organizations look at organizational needs and cultural fit simultaneously to achieve a “best-fit model.”¹¹ In this model, the HR manager and managerial leader work together to define the ideal well-rounded candidate and employee, one who is equally successful in the job competencies and the organizational culture.

In the *McKinsey Quarterly*, Guthridge and others report that the strategic planning for talent acquisition duties that the HR manager influences the entire organization's focus on talent acquisition. However, developing a structural approach to obtain the ideal employee is challenging.¹² They found several key factors that impede planning for talent acquisition, including failing to develop a talent strategy that aligns with organizational goals, not focusing on developing talent at the middle and senior levels, and not understanding the type of individuals who are interested in working in the organization. In order to overcome these challenges in libraries, organizational leaders should consider ways to create a talent management system that combines innovation with policy at the highest level. To accomplish this, Neal suggests that academic libraries consider greater flexibility in hiring practices. He offers strategies such as "extended temporary or fixed term appointments and staff sharing" as options for talent acquisition.¹³ Additionally, academic libraries should identify ways to communicate these talent acquisition innovations outside of the organization.

Building an attractive organization

The best and most qualified people are also the most highly sought-after candidates. So a key practice in talent acquisition is building an attractive organization. In order to build an appealing organization, HR managers and managerial leaders must work together to brand the library in a favorable manner. Together, they must be able to sell the library as the best place to work, promoting this message both internally and externally. However, the first step for an academic library to accomplish this is to understand its workforce (both for entry-level and leadership positions). Currently, the librarian workforce is experiencing an influx of incoming Millennials (also known as Generation Y). This population is considered to have fundamentally different work-related stimuli from their predecessors (Baby Boomers and Generation X) and as a result may require different talent acquisition strategies.¹⁴

Millennials are often referred to as technology natives; they have high energy and are highly functioning multitaskers. This type of individual is precisely what academic libraries need to propel the profession forward, but research shows that many current managerial leaders do not understand how to work with Millennials.¹⁵ This issue, however, can be addressed through organizational culture. Academic libraries can develop an environment that is appealing to Millennials—one that is trustworthy, flexible, and achievement-oriented. As employees, Millennials also need recognition, company coaching, frequent feedback, and work-life balance.¹⁶ Currently, many academic libraries are not set up to handle the needs of Millennials, and many libraries that are working to become more attractive to them are not doing an adequate job of communicating their message.¹⁷ Consequently, those libraries have difficulty recruiting these individuals and integrating them into an intergenerational population; but with branding, libraries can create an environment that promotes a work-life balance and thrives on recognition and advancement opportunities.

In talent acquisition, branding is “defined as the personality of a company as a preferred employer so that a person joins it instead of its competitors.”¹⁸ The HR manager, managerial leader, and other library staff should promote these attributes through social media whenever possible. The promotional materials should include language about the culture of the organization, including amenities in each job description, and share information about the benefits outside of the organization (e.g. funding for participation in professional associations); these efforts will allow an organization to craft a brand that attracts top talent.

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Positively branding an organization requires that employers focus on both intrinsic and extrinsic values to attract top talent. Carless and Wintle found work-life balance policies to be highly influential on potential employees.²⁰ They found that many employees would like to have satisfying experiences both at and away from work and view such policies as a

means to accomplish this. In the case of Millennials in particular, highlighting work-life balance policies such as flexible hours, alternative schedules, and growth opportunities has been advantageous in recruitment and retention.²¹ Additionally, communicating these opportunities externally and throughout the talent acquisition process influences a candidate's perception of organizational right-fit.²² Internally, libraries should work to promote innovation, transparency, and a commitment to the value of the organization with the idea that current employees will remain engaged and make referrals to outsiders, thus creating a branded talent community.

Building talent communities

Talent communities are pipelines that connect an organization to prospective employees. Developing successful pipelines require the engagement of all library staff to effectively communicate the value of the organization's brand. As a result, pipelining often involves incentives such as referral programs that engage a wide and diverse audience (e.g. prospective candidates, past candidates, student workers, etc.) while further building a brand.²³ Much like branding, building talent communities happens before an organization advertises an open position. To build talent communities, libraries in states such as New Jersey and California have identified paraprofessionals and interns who match the organizations' needs and have created educational and training opportunities that further enhanced their competency levels before a position was created and opened.²⁴ As a result, when a position became available, the libraries had a custom-created community of highly qualified candidates. Managerial leaders wanting to expand on this practice might also consider keeping in contact with Masters of Library Science students and other entry-level librarians who show potential for their organizations. Cultivating and maintaining these relationships promotes the organization and develops strong connections to managers. A

more active engagement on part of the managerial leaders might also include participation in programs such as the American Library Association (ALA) New Members Round Table (NRMT)²⁵ résumé review services. Implementing employee referral programs strengthens both branding and talent communities.²⁶ Library staff are primed to recognize individuals who could do the work, participate well on the team, and fit the organization. Building a referral program also helps the library build recognition and incentivizes the organizational culture, which in itself is attractive to many Millennials. These practices require managerial leaders and HR managers to work closely together to determine what qualifications are important to the organization and to share those qualifications in various formats, such as web branding and referral programs.

A key component of a talent community is the strength of the managerial leader as an internal and external leader. Creating successful talent communities is based largely on creating organizations that are attractive to potential employees. Strong library leadership is crucial to create an appealing, branded organization, and the employees currently working for an organization can be its biggest promoters.²⁷ Additionally, the opportunity to work with reputable, engaged supervisors is also an incentive for potential employees.²⁸ For example, Bersin found that Millennials are highly motivated by the chance to garner top references from individuals highly regarded in a particular profession.²⁹ Additionally, those highly regarded managerial leaders often represent the organization at conferences and create a “buzz,” which potential employees may hear. As a result, it is important that organizations looking to attract top talent are also actively involved in engaging and retaining current employees, including those in leadership positions. It is not only important for leadership to project outwardly, but it must reflect internally as well. This is for several reasons: 1) word of mouth can be the most influential way to create a pipeline, 2) supervisory relationships are important to top talent,³⁰ and 3) Millennials are looking for close working relationships with

their immediate supervisors.³¹ Bhatangar found that managers were the key drivers for employee engagement and retention because they have the most direct influence on employee goals, performance, and direction.³² As a result, bolstering great leadership within an organization is essential to top talent acquisition. Collectively, promoting great leadership, encouraging current employees to endorse the organization, and identifying potential employees can assist in creating a highly qualified pool of candidates for open positions. However, the talent acquisition process also relies on the organization's ability to create a holistic candidate experience during the recruiting, interviewing, and on-boarding phases.

Holistic candidate experience

Once a library creates an attractive brand, the library staff should review the recruiting process to ensure that it is designed to help the right candidate fill an open position. The recruiting process is an important aspect of top talent acquisition because it serves as an introduction to the organization. Not only does the hiring process allow an organization the opportunity to find the best candidate for an open position, but it also provides a potential candidate the opportunity to assess the organization for right-fit. Traditionally, recruiting processes within highly bureaucratic organizations (e.g. state agencies and higher education institutions) have impeded some libraries' ability to hire. For example, academic libraries often engage in ineffective, long, and costly search processes, handicapping their opportunities to select top talent.³³ These search processes often involve an extended call for applicants, a tiered interview process, and poor communication with applicants. Additionally, the traditional approach to hiring librarians based on skill and experience inhibits the library from proactively planning for future library needs. To address these issues, libraries should consider adapting different hiring models. Lo recommends hiring for attributes and anticipated needs, since the demands of the library are rapidly and

constantly changing.³⁴ This is not to suggest, however, that libraries neglect the skills currently needed in each position. Libraries might consider anticipated skill sets as secondary qualifications and aim to enhance existing skill sets in each employee by embracing a strong culture of professional development and training. To accomplish this, libraries might consider job descriptions as a tool to inform potential candidates about the organization and focus more prominently on culture and attributes over knowledge, skills, and abilities.³⁵

Job descriptions convey a sense of direction or purpose not only for a position but for an organization as well. They speak to the needs of the organization and should therefore be given careful consideration. However, a library's obligation to meet the evolving demands of its users often forces it to reconsider the type of information included in job descriptions. The challenge of articulating a library's needs and recruiting individuals who can meet the changing demands of the organization, department, or industry requires a heavy focus on the language used to express its mission and values, which helps paint a well-rounded picture of the organization.³⁶ For this reason, in order to create balance between departmental and organizational needs, writing a job description ought to be a collaborative action between the hiring department manager and the HR manager. Well-constructed job descriptions entice great candidates to apply but do not necessarily address right-fit. Consequently, the actual interview might include a combination of activities, including a candidate assessment.

The use of online search engines such as *Next Generation* that crawl the World Wide Web for individuals blogging, publishing, and presenting in a particular area might also help libraries make decisions about the right-fit of top talent. Industries such as technology and programming have used *Remarkable Hire* and *Entelo* software, which use algorithms to help assess the potential of an individual within an organization or duty. A variety of interactions

during a candidate's interview would also help answer key questions about organizational fit. For example, a candidate interview for a potential organization might consist of personality test, presentations, group conversations, and the opportunity to observe others doing the job that they considering. Interviews are essential to understanding the potential for an individual within an organization. As such, it is crucial that organizations consider the interview a two-way interaction between potential employer and potential employee. The organization must work to create a transparent process for the interviewer. Rynes and Cable found that serious candidates are equally concerned about choosing the most appropriate organization as they are about choosing the most appropriate job.³⁷ During the interview, organizations should refrain from promising benefits they cannot deliver and should instead provide an accurate picture of the organization, including its challenges.³⁸ Finally, organizations should also view the on-boarding³⁹ process as an extension of the interview process by employing a coaching and development model of engagement with new employees. This model should involve constant feedback between supervisor and employee, including identification of areas for professional development and a system for recognition of achievement and stellar work.⁴⁰ This will allow the new employee and the organization to further assess right-fit and develop top talent.

Conclusion

In order to build the best staff to handle the changing needs of modern academia in the twenty-first century, the administrators of academic libraries must consider revising their approach to attracting and selecting suitable candidates. Ideally, this new departure to talent acquisition would move toward adapting a best practices approach that would allow librarians to focus on acquiring the candidates most qualified to assist in fulfilling the organizational mission rather than matching librarian experience with the responsibilities for

a specific job opening. This best practices approach should involve extensive strategic planning, an acute focus on organizational appeal to a variety of individuals, especially Millennials, the formation of a talent community that is well known and respected in the profession, and the development of a holistic candidate experience. The application of this best practices approach would take the form of a collaborative effort between a variety of individuals within the library who would share responsibilities such as writing job descriptions, engaging potential candidates, and promoting the organization. Hopefully, this approach will lead to a beneficial experience for all concerned and promote an atmosphere that would allow the library and the candidate to make a selection decision based on organizational and individual satisfaction and future potential. Furthermore, it will increase the number of highly engaged, high-performing librarians who are hireable, retainable, and promotable.

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Published: August 2015

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