

Important Steps to Hiring Well

The best way to prevent employment-related problems is to hire well in the first place. Finding the right person can take some planning and patience, yet is always worth the time and effort. In addition to the obvious benefit of gaining a well-qualified individual to do the work, a strong hiring process can boost employee morale and productivity.

Start with knowing what you need in a candidate. That may sound obvious, but hiring managers or committees sometimes lack clarity and then waste valuable interview time discovering what they don't want. In advance of the search, consider the qualifications that have made others successful in this role. Take the time to carefully review and update the job description so it accurately identifies the job's responsibilities, qualifications, and essential physical demands. An accurate job description supports several steps within an effective recruitment process.

Consider the point of view of those you wish to attract. The recruitment process is a two-way street, and potential candidates will evaluate your municipality just as much as you evaluate them. Following are some key steps that can help you create a hiring process that is smooth and successful. *Important note: If your municipality has a personnel policy or collective bargaining agreement that includes hiring steps and requirements, be sure to follow those carefully.*

Plan ahead to ensure consistency. Treat applicants in a consistent and non-discriminatory manner by following the same steps for all. Larger municipalities may use an electronic Applicant Tracking System (ATS) to help manage applications and the search process. When planning, it helps to decide upon the steps and who will be responsible for carrying out specific tasks. Examples of planning questions to ask include:

- What is the appropriate pay range?
- Who will write job postings and advertisements?
- Which application materials should candidates submit?
- Who will receive and track the applications?
- Who will communicate with applicants at various stages of the search process?
- How will applicants be ranked and selected for interviews?
- What is the best interview structure and ideal number of rounds?
- Will there be testing or skill demonstration required, particularly of finalists?
- Who will craft interview questions to be posed of all candidates?
- Who will provide input and who will make the actual hiring decision?
- Who will conduct background and/or reference checks?
- How can all search materials be managed so they remain secure and confidential?

Attract a pool of well-qualified candidates. This step begins with an up-to-date job description which accurately identifies job responsibilities and qualifications. Create a compelling and targeted job advertisement by being clear about the position and by touting what makes your municipality

an attractive place to work. Let current employees know about the opening and post it on the municipal website in addition to well-suited online and print venues.

Communicate with all applicants. Candidates appreciate knowing that their application has been received. Email is a quick way to send an acknowledgement and thank-you to every applicant. Municipalities often let applicants know the steps and general timing of the search process and apprise them once an individual has been hired. Keep communications with unsuccessful applicants simple and polite. In the case of interviewees, a personal phone call or more tailored rejection letter is most appropriate.

Screen and interview. Spreadsheets or other electronic tools help you compare applicant information with the job qualifications. Use the job description as the basis from which to craft lawful, job-related questions. Create a structured format in which all interviewees are asked the same questions. Naturally, the interview plays a critical role in discerning who is well-qualified and apt to succeed within your municipal environment. Additionally, interviews provide an important opportunity to let candidates know why they would want to work for you. In order to glean enough information to make a wise selection decision, consider a second round of interviews, or even a third, if needed.

If a quorum of a legislative body or a duly appointed subcommittee will conduct the interviews, be sure to comply with Vermont's Open Meeting Law. Individuals generally expect that their job application will be kept confidential, especially if they are currently employed. Plan a confidential process so you don't breach that trust.

Select and verify. Once you decide whom to hire, always check at least three professional references before extending an offer. Don't rely on reference letters. Phone calls with individuals who have worked directly with the candidate afford the opportunity to frame your questions and ask for more details. As with interview questions, all reference checking questions should be job-related to avoid unlawful discrimination. Under Vermont law, you cannot ask for present salary nor salary history, unless you are verifying information the candidate volunteered on their own.

Make the offer of employment contingent upon the candidate providing relevant transcripts, licenses, or other necessary credentials. For positions that require a Commercial Drivers License (CDL), be sure to follow federal pre-employment drug and alcohol testing requirements. (See the VLCT-PACIF Commercial Motor Vehicle Driver Operations Manual for further information.)

For certain positions, it makes sense to hire a firm to conduct a more in-depth background check before making an offer. When doing so, it is important to follow legal notification and sign-off requirements.

Be patient. Aim for a well-qualified second or third choice as a backup plan in case the top candidate rejects your offer. That said, if you have significant doubts about the candidate pool, it is better to leave the position vacant. Hire temporary help, if necessary, while you pause and evaluate your search process for potential improvements, such as pay level or advertising venues. When a first recruitment attempt falls through, a second effort usually succeeds.