

Remote Hiring Innovation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

Extension's in-person hiring processes have been complicated in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. To prevent delays in hiring for three vacant county faculty positions, our search committee conducted remote interviews using a variety of innovative techniques, such as a live "we're hiring" webinar, an icebreaker session, and live and recorded candidate presentations. The results of our innovative efforts included a larger pool of applicants, relaxed web-based video interviews, and savings in time and expenses. These strategies could be considered as new and effective approaches and practices to hiring and interviewing in Extension as the pandemic continues and into the future.

Keywords: [hiring](#), [search committee](#), [remote interviewing](#), [innovation](#), [COVID-19](#)

Melanie D. Jewkes
Extension Associate
Professor

Jonathan J. Swinton
Extension Assistant
Professor

Shannon Cromwell
Extension Associate
Professor

David G. Schramm
Associate Professor
and Family Life
Extension Specialist

Naomi Brower
Extension Professor

Utah State University

Introduction

As members of the baby boomer generation move toward retirement, university Extension services are faced with challenges concerning workforce attrition and the need to employ innovative recruitment strategies that attract potential candidates (Borr & Young, 2010; Colby & Ortman, 2014; Henley et al., 2018). Due to increased retirements in 2020, Utah State University (USU) Extension was faced with the challenge of filling three tenure-track faculty positions in three diverse counties at the same time. To address this need, we were selected to make up a "super search committee" consisting of pretenure and tenured county faculty and a state specialist.

Normally, USU Extension's hiring procedures for faculty include an all-day event on the main university campus during which multiple face-to-face interviews occur. In addition, on a subsequent day, a candidate is required to travel and meet with staff and stakeholders at the county level where the position is based. The logistics of screening applicants and setting up face-to-face interview schedules through an in-person format is a complicated and laborious process. However, the face-to-face interviewing method has been found to build capacity and create social networks that can be advantageous for new faculty (Sobrero & Craycraft, 2008).

Tasked with filling three county faculty positions during a time of travel restrictions and social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we adopted new procedures and practices to minimize both disruptions in the

hiring process and diminishment of the positive effects of face-to-face interviews. As a group, we adapted to the situation, identified resources, and implemented a strategic communication and public relations campaign (Houston, 2018; Rice & Jahn, 2020) using innovative methods to reach potential candidates. We implemented various technology platforms, including social media, webinars, and internet-based evaluations, to reach a broad and diverse group of Extension prospects (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020; Fawcett et al., 2020; Rozler-Rich et al., 2011).

Method

We hosted a live "we're hiring" webinar 2 weeks after the positions were posted. This was listed in the position announcement and advertised through social media. During the webinar, we took 22 min to provide an overview and brief history of Extension, describe roles and responsibilities of county and state faculty, identify focus areas of home and community faculty (e.g., health and wellness, relationships, nutrition, rural online initiatives, food preservation, etc.), and review a summary of the job description and discuss specific needs to be addressed through the position. We then spent approximately 30 min answering participants' questions submitted through the chat function.

A recording of the webinar was then posted online for others to view at a later time. A total of 61 people viewed the webinar live, and there were 662 views of the recording. Numerous applicants mentioned in their application materials and throughout the interview process that they had viewed the webinar and found it helpful.

The virtual interview process presented unique challenges that necessitated some creative adaptations. Past on-campus interviews usually have included meals and casual time with the search committee and allowed for socializing and getting acquainted. These informal interactions aided in the engagement and empathetic joining processes, which are keys to openness in communication, and rapport building (Baucom et al., 2005; Harter & Blacksmith, 2010). To adapt, we began the virtual interview via videoconferencing with brief introductions followed by an informal icebreaker session that was led by a committee member and included eight to 10 lighthearted questions based on the concept of empathetic joining (Baucom et al., 2005). To include everyone in the new process, the candidate was asked one question and then the same question was asked of a committee member (see appendix for questions). The icebreaker session typically lasted 15–20 min. Following the icebreaker, we asked established interview questions.

The remote interview process also included a 45-min presentation by each candidate. County and campus Extension personnel were invited to participate remotely and ask questions. The webinar presentations were recorded, and county faculty and staff were encouraged to watch them. Following each candidate's virtual interview, we sent a Qualtrics survey to all Extension personnel, and those who participated in some way were invited to provide feedback and rate the candidate.

Lessons Learned

Restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the use of innovative technology platforms for hiring county-based Extension faculty. Experience from previous faculty searches indicated that some applicants have a very shallow understanding of Extension, our mission, and the roles and responsibilities associated with Extension positions. The webinar offered a foundational understanding of Extension, provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions, and allowed the search committee to clarify the position details.

We believe the webinar contributed to a larger pool of eligible applicants than has occurred for other searches in recent years.

Remote meetings also saved travel time and expenses and allowed us to extend interviews to more candidates. Furthermore, use of icebreaker activities likely contributed to openness in communication and rapport building between candidates and committee members (Baucom et al., 2005; Harter & Blacksmith, 2010). Some candidates informed us later via email that the icebreaker had helped them relax before the interview and see the more personal sides of the search committee members that may otherwise have been lost in a virtual interview.

Regarding limitations, the lessons learned we present are based on comparison to prior search committee experiences and may not reflect confounding factors unique to the time of the searches. For example, job announcements were posted toward the end of the school semester when recent graduates would have been looking for employment. And they were posted during uncertain times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the larger pool of applicants may have been reflective of the unique time, one in which more individuals may have been looking for steady full-time employment than during other searches.

In conclusion, despite the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated the use of innovations, we found that our adaptations were sufficient to select top candidates. Moreover, even after the pandemic restrictions have eased, these innovative methods may be useful and valid as recruiting and interviewing strategies both to us and to those elsewhere in Extension.

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Melanie D. Jewkes. Email: melanie.jewkes@usu.edu

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Appendix

Icebreaker Questions

Tell us about yourself:

1. What three words describe you best?
2. Do you have a personal hero? Who is it and why?
3. If you could meet any historical figure, either living or deceased, who would you choose and why?
4. If you could instantly learn any skill, what would it be and why?
5. What is your favorite hobby?
6. What is your favorite quote?
7. Where in the world do you wish you could visit and why?
8. What would the title of your autobiography be?
9. What is one life lesson you will never forget?
10. What would you like to be known for?

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