Hiring the Right Staff to Negotiate Research: From Position Description to Candidate Selection

Barbara Gray – East Carolina University (USA) Stefania Grotti - Politecnico de Milano (Italy)

Today's Topics: Considerations for Hiring

- Identifying the optimal organizational structure and staffing plan for the unit
 - Case study: Politecnico di Milano Research Office restructuring
- Planning for reorganization/reassignment of roles/duties
 - Snapshot: East Carolina University restructuring of pre-award services
- Developing well-written position descriptions
- Interviewing asking the right questions to predict job success
- Reference checking

Case Study: Politecnico di Milano Research Office

- The Research Office is part of the Central Administration
- Decentralization of services
- Mission: To support researchers in doing science and optimize their efforts

Support Activities to Research Communication

• Increasing of the information flow for the researchers

 Organization of thematic events on research communication, soft skills with the aim to provide support to researchers and allow them to be more exhaustive in the management of projects dissemination activities

Interdisciplinary Research

- The Department organization allows a good coverage of disciplinary research
 - Today the world is more complex and societal challenges are more interdisciplinary
 - Both European strategic research priorities and company needs have shifted

→ Need to adapt to the changing scenarios

The Approach

• Mapping of research competencies of the department

• Identification of interdisciplinary topics from the rectorate and mapping of competencies of the departments

 Stimulation of inter-department cooperation through the proposal of new joint research labs among departments financed for the startup (2012-2016: 25 labs) on interdisciplinary topics

Some Numbers...

H2020

14°

Art & Design $> 7^{\circ}$

1274 Projects presented158 Projects financed> 75 M€

QS 2017 by subject in the world

Engineering & Technology > 24°

Architecture/Built Environment >

ERC > H2020 18 Projects financed MSCA > H2020 22 Projects financed

ERC Helpdesk More than 220 users in 2 years

Marie Curie Helpdesk Work in progress

Training courses for the professional development of young researchers 2015: 25 courses 2016: 35 courses 2017: 8 courses +14 PhD School

Ongoing contracts 2015: 2308 - € 41.220.900 Ongoing contracts 2016: 2995 - € 52.824.755 Interdisciplinary tables -Health (Jan 2017) - Manufacturing and Security (work in progress) PARTICIPATION TO EUROPEAN NETWORKS ON RESEARCH (VISION 2020, SCIENCE BUSINESS, EUA, EARMA, APRE, NCURA, IDEA LEAGUE, ALLIANCE4TECH)

Brokerage Events and Scouting 2016: 7 events

Organisation until 2013

HORIZONTAL STRUCTURE

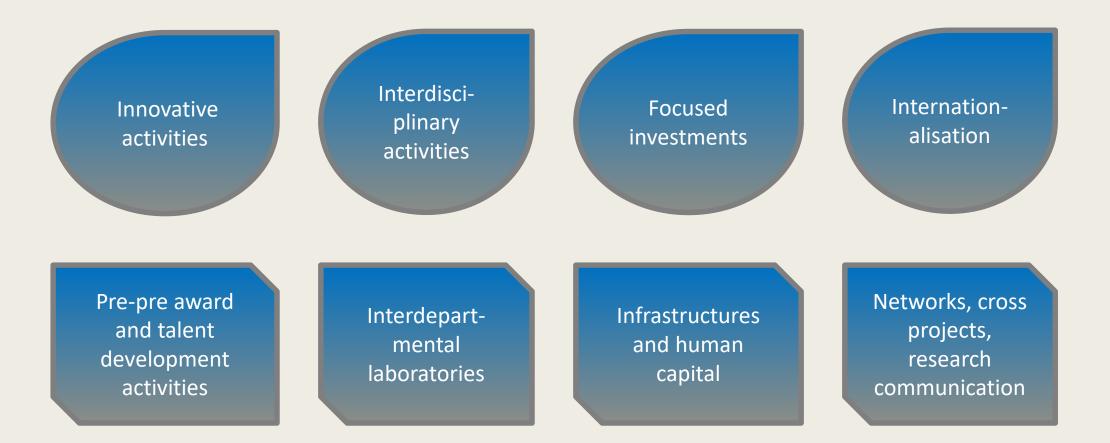
General support on national funding

General support on international funding Administrative aspects and monitoring

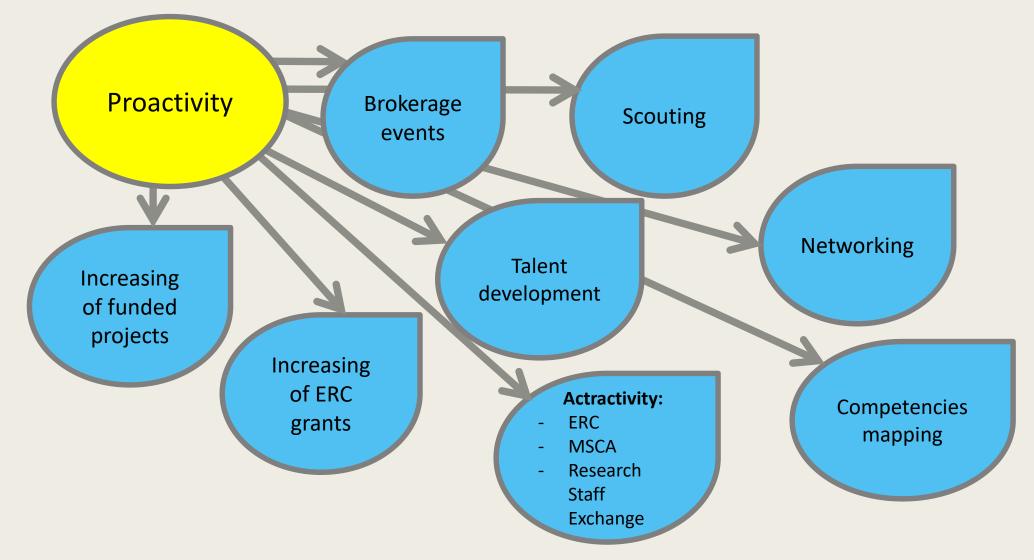
SERVICES PROVIDED

- Information on funding opportunity
- Support to the management of national funding programmes
- Support to the management of international funding programmes
- Monitoring on the research related activity in our University
- Management of central processes related to the research in our University.

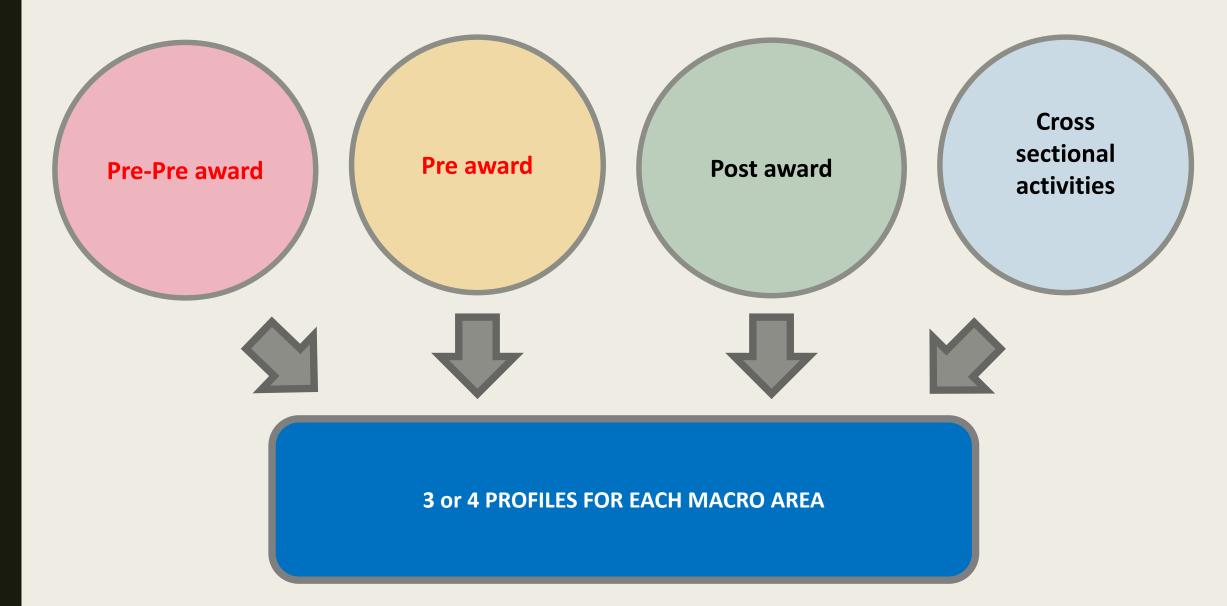
New Activities...



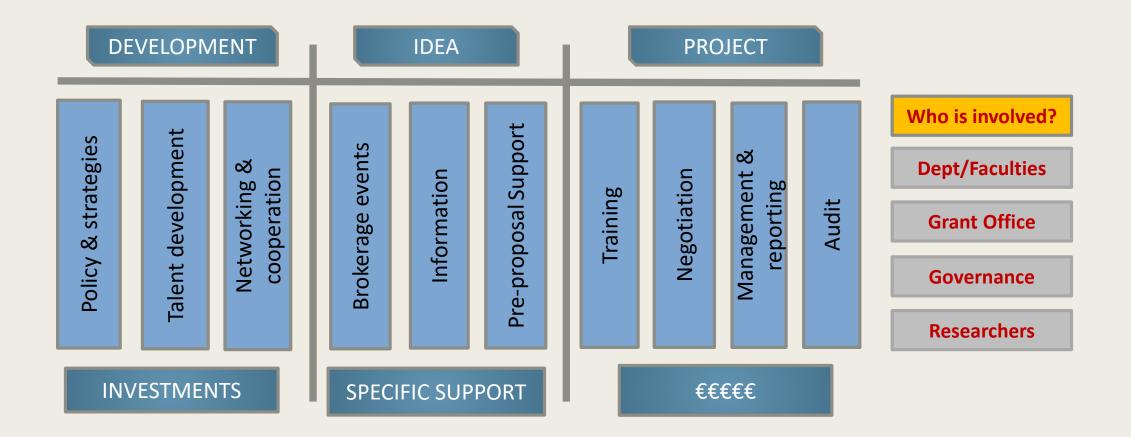
Summary of the New Activities



Research Office Activities



Our Strategic Process...



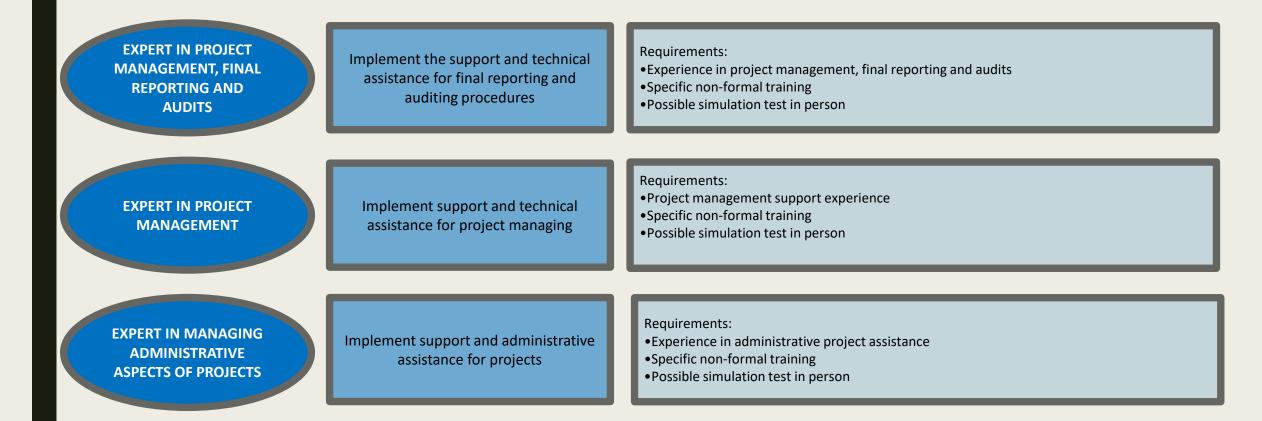
PRE-PRE AWARD

EXPERT IN RESEARCH STRATEGIES	To develop and implement internationalisation Research processes and organise coaching strategies	Requirements: •Strategic development experience within the research and innovation field •Formal or non-formal training in the research management sector •Strategic coordination and planning experience for complex entities •Knowledge of the university regulatory framework and of the entity's regulations •Knowledge of national and international research evaluation systems •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN SCOUTING AND MACRO STRATEGY RESEARCH	Analysis of the scientific and technological profile of research departments and of individual researchers in order to implement matching strategies with financing and networking opportunities	Requirements: • Technical-scientific background or degree • Knowledge of national and international research classification standards • Knowledge of the main European and international research platforms and networks • Knowledge of instruments for identifying info-days and brokerage events • Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN CAREER AND DEVELOPMENT COACHING	Implement support processes for research career development	Requirements: • Humanities degree or background • Knowledge of industrial and organisational psychology • Knowledge of the pathways for achieving a career in research • Knowledge of research evaluation criteria • Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND LOGISTIC ORGANISATION FOR TALENT DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES	Implement the administrative and logistic organisation for talent development activities	Requirements: Knowledge of the regulations and procedures for the use of the university's spaces and tools •Organisational and usage skills for logistic resources •Possible simulation test in person

PRE AWARD

EXPERT IN INDIVIDUAL GRANT PLANNING	Implement support and technical assistance for individual grants	Requirements: •Experience of European individual grant projects •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN PARTNERSHIP OR COLLABORATION GRANT PLANNING	Implement support and technical assistance for participating in international and European tender applications	Requirements: •Experience of European partnership or collaboration grant planning •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN NATIONAL AND REGIONAL TENDER APPLICATION PLANNING	Implement support and technical assistance for participating in national and regional tender applications	Requirements: •Experience of national and regional tender application planning •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES FOR CORPORATE SECTOR AND FOR PARTICIPATING IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR TENDER	Implement support and technical assistance for participating in the corporate sector (commercial) and to national and international tenders	Requirements: • Participation experience and administrative support for national or international tenders • Specific- non-formal training • Possible simulation test in person

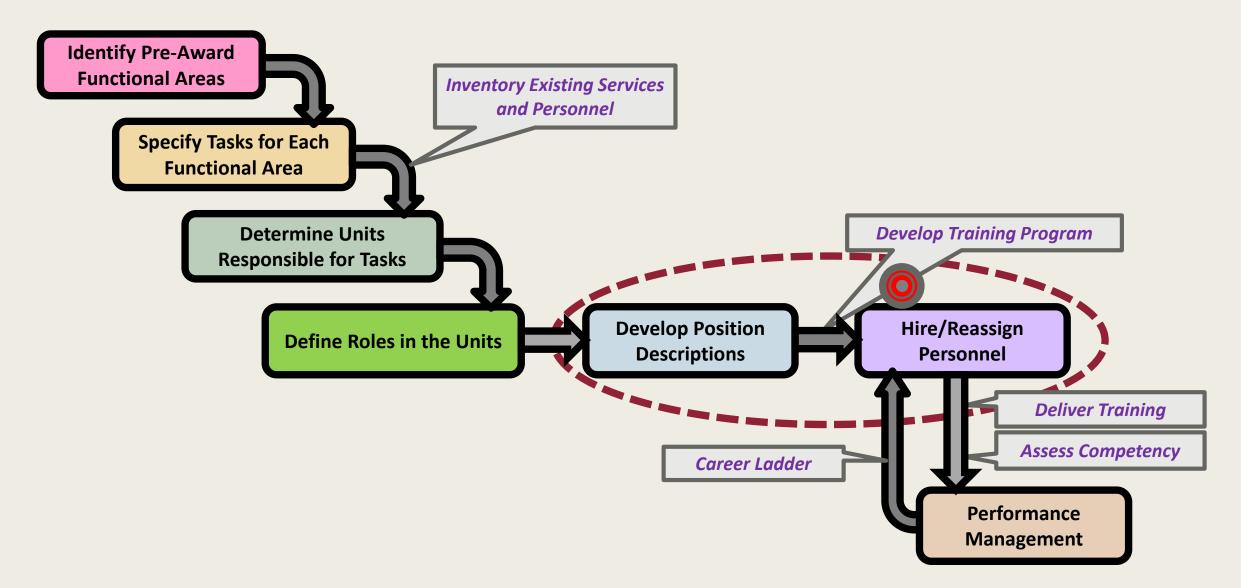
POST AWARD



CROSS CUTTING ACTIVITIES

EXPERT IN CONTRACTS AND LEGAL ASPECTS CONCERNING PROJECTS AND RESEARCH	Development of legal and technical support and assistance in relation to national and international agreements and their ethical aspects	Requirements: •Degree in juridical subjects or law •Experience in contract management of European and international projects •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN MONITORING AND MANAGING RESEARCH DATA	Develop research monitoring activities and statistics	Requirements: •Experience in data management •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN CATALOGUING RESEARCH OUTCOME PRODUCTS	Develop a catalogue of research outcome products	Requirements: •Experience concerning research outcome products •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person
EXPERT IN SECRETARIAT SUPPORT FOR COORDINATING THE OPERATING UNITS	Implement the Research Office secretariat services	Requirements: •Experience in coordinating secretariat •Specific non-formal training •Possible simulation test in person

ECU Pre-Award Decentralization Process



Developing a Well-Written Position Description: General Considerations

Be realistic. Can the individual reasonably accomplish the tasks assigned in a normal work week? Don't expect a Superman or Superwoman who can do everything that needs to be done.

Be timely. What are the tasks you expect the individual to be able to accomplish in the foreseeable future? Save future initiatives for which you do not yet have approval/resources for updates to the positon description and possible promotion of staff at later time.

Be logical. The position description should be well-organized, easy to read and understand, and should be ready for public dissemination/recruiting as written. The position description is generic and should not be confused with performance management plans for individual employees.

Be general enough to allow for changes in the research administration field (e.g., adoption of a new proposal submission system by an agency). **But be specific** enough to outline the current major responsibilities of the position.

Developing a Well-Written Position Description: General Considerations

Coordinate duties of with duties of other positions in the unit and consider level of performance expected (e.g., advanced vs. journey level positions).

Use the performance management process to establish goals/objectives for new activities/assignments that still fit within the existing position description.

Review the position description annually and tweak as needed. Unless major restructuring occurs that significantly changes roles and responsibilities or the position is upgraded, only minor changes should be necessary.

See "A Tale of Two Position Descriptions" in handout for an example of a poor position description and a much improved rewrite.

Components of a Position Description

Purpose of the organizational unit

Purpose of the position

Major responsibility areas of the position and tasks associated with each area Minimum required qualifications

Preferred qualifications, including knowledge, skills, and abilities Other information required by institutional policy and procedures

Example: Primary Purpose of the Organization Unit

The Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) provides assistance to faculty, administrators, and students in applying for external funding to support research, instructional activities, and service programs that address the mission of the institution.

OSP personnel counsel individuals from all disciplines in relationship development with sponsors and assist in the development of effective, fundable proposals with viable budgets.

OSP has the delegated authority to final approve and submit all proposals to external sponsors and to negotiate and accept externally-sponsored awards, assuring full administrative and financial compliance with institutional policies and governmental regulations.

OSP works closely with the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance (ORIC) to ensure the ethical conduct of research, with the Office of Grants & Contracts (OGC) in administration of funded projects, and with the Office of Technology Transfer (OTT) protect the institution's intellectual assets.

Example: Primary Purpose of the Position

The Grants Officer (GO) position in the Office of Research Support (ORS) is an administrative position with a focus on delivery of quality pre-award and award acceptance support services to faculty, staff, and students.

The Grants Officer

- Collaborates with University faculty, administrators, and students in preparing grant and contract proposals. Provides expert guidance and recommendations on fundamental approaches to successful grantsmanship and policies and procedures related to crafting, constructing, and submitting high-quality grant proposals and contract bids.
- Reviews award documents for acceptance, and negotiates contracts for execution by, the Director
- Prepares subaward agreements for collaborating organizations and obtains authorized signatures
- Compiles documents in an award package and transmits award package to the Office of Research Accounting
- Ensures the completeness and accuracy of electronic proposal and award records

Example: Major Responsibility Areas

For Grants Officer (Pre-Award Office)

- 1. Proposal development assistance, final review, and submission
- 2. Award acceptance and award action management
- 3. Institutional and professional capacity building

Note: An estimated percent effort for each of these major responsibility areas may be requested by HR

See Research Administrators Certification Council "Body of Knowledge" and Grant Professionals Certification Institute "Validated Competencies and Skills" in the handout for help in identifying responsibility areas and tasks.

Example: Major Responsibility Area and Associated Tasks

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITY AREA: 1. Proposal Development Assistance, Review, and Submission

Associated Tasks:

- Collaborate with faculty, administrators, and students in preparing grant and contract proposals. Provide expert guidance and recommendations on fundamental approaches to successful grantsmanship and policies and procedures related to crafting, constructing, and submitting high-quality grant proposals and contract bids.
- Maintain and share knowledge of award management practices sufficient to inform effective project design and development.
- Assist investigators in interpreting sponsor application requirements and in preparing proposals and budgets, including addressing compensation/time allocation issues, cost-sharing, and indirect cost rate application, and utilizing sponsor application formsets and websites.

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITY AREA: 1. Proposal Development Assistance, Review, and Submission

Associated Tasks:

- Identify and communicate with personnel both inside and outside the University whose cooperation is key to proposal success. Collaborate with departmental staff, deans, associate deans for research, department chairs, center/institute directors, and external points of contact to ensure investigators preparing proposals are fully supported.
- As needed, consult with University personnel to address issues that may interfere with proposal submission. Professionally balance the criticality of institutional processes with firm proposal submission deadlines.
- Assist investigators in negotiating internal approval procedures for proposal submission. Provide final University review and approval of proposals/contract bids and submit proposals to sponsors using a variety of electronic submission systems.
- Maintain comprehensive and accurate official University record of proposal submissions in University's proposal tracking system.

Minimum Required Qualifications

- Usually specified by institutional policy
- Developed for a broad classification of position
- Usually broad but very quantifiable
- Includes an educational requirement, minimum number of years of general or "related" experience, and any required certifications
- Should not specify knowledge, skills, or abilities that are difficult to quantify
- Establishes criteria for the first cut in the candidate selection process

Example: Bachelor's degree and one year of experience related to the area of assignment; or equivalent combination of training and experience.

Preferred Qualifications

Specific to the position

- Additional qualifications beyond minimum requirements
- *Preferred education; possibly specified field(s); preferred certification(s)*
- Minimum years of related job experience or experience in a similar environment
- Specific knowledge related to the position
- Position-specific "soft" skills/abilities/attributes (effective communication, conflict management, organizational skills, detail orientation, intellectual curiosity, etc.)
- To be demonstrated through applicant's reported experiences and verified by references

Avoid being too narrow so that you don't exclude potentially good candidates from the pool!

Example: Preferred Qualifications

A Master's degree with a minimum of one year of experience in university research administration, proposal preparation, and/or grants management, or a Bachelor's degree and a minimum of three years of related experience.

Substantial knowledge of federal agency regulations, funding programs, application requirements, and formsets.

In-depth understanding of Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (2 CFR 200).

Understanding of legal terms and conditions that may appear in sponsored project agreements. Knowledge of standard contract terms and conditions and the types of terms that are generally unacceptable to universities.

Certified Research Administrator (CRA) or Certified Pre-Award Research Administrator (CPRA) credential from the Research Administrators Certification Council (RACC) or ability to obtain certification within twelve months of hire.

Proficiency in Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Adobe Pro and with grants.gov and federal agency electronic proposal submission and award management systems.

Demonstrated skill/ability in problem analysis and resolution; verbal and written communication; relationship building; facilitation and conflict resolution; mentoring and training; and organization/prioritization/time management. Must be able to manage multiple priorities with multiple deadlines in a dynamic changing environment while remaining service oriented.

See "Soft Skills Inventory" in handout for help in identifying desired soft skills.

Preparing to Interview

Interviewing Goal: Determine how the candidate has demonstrated appropriate knowledge, experience, skills, and characteristics in the past to predict his/her likely success in the new position

- Use "behavioral interviewing" techniques
 - Reveals the candidate's thought processes and actual behaviors in real situations
 - Allows interviewer to follow up on responses to elicit further detail, e.g.,
 - "Why did you take that approach?"
 - "In retrospect, what did you learn from that experience?"
 - "Tell me about the steps you took, and why each was important, to put that new business process in place."
 - Communicates a genuine interest in the candidate's potential to contribute to the organization

Interview Question Preparation

Assess knowledge and technical expertise with content-related opening and follow-up questions that require descriptive answers of actual experience. You are also looking for how the candidate has applied his/her knowledge and technical expertise in specific situations.

Examples:

Assess Breadth of Experience: "Tell me about your experience negotiating contracts. What types of organizations did you negotiate with (domestic or foreign industry, foreign governments, others)? For what types of contracts?"

Assess Depth of Knowledge: "What have been the most prevalent problem terms and conditions for universities that you've seen in the contracts you've negotiated?

Interview Question Preparation

Assess Skill Level: "What is your typical approach with the other party when there are terms and conditions that you either can't legally accept or university policy strongly indicates that you should not accept? What have you found to be the most successful strategy to arrive at an agreement that works for both parties?"

Assess Candidate's Application of Knowledge/Skill: "Can you describe the most difficult contract negotiation you've had?"

- "Why was it difficult?"
- "What were your negotiation steps?"
- "What was the outcome?"
- *"What did you learn that helped you be a better negotiator?"*

These two questions are examples of behavioral interviewing.

What is Behavioral Interviewing?

- A relatively new but increasingly used method of interviewing job candidates
- Used to evaluate a candidate's experiences and behaviors in order to determine potential for success in the new position
- Based on the notion that past performance is the best predictor of future behavior
 - Behavioral interviewing is estimated to be 55% predictive of future job behavior
 - Traditional interviewing is estimated to be only 10% predictive
- Behavioral interviewing provides a more objective set of facts upon which to make hiring decisions than other interviewing methods provide
- Process is structured and is much more probing than traditional "conversational" or short question/answer interviewing
- Requires greater interviewing skill, but that skill can be learned and improved through practice

Behavioral Interviewing Technique

- Interviewer asks a main question about a candidate's experience with a particular situation
 - "Tell me about a new business process you developed and implemented."
- As candidate responds, interviewer asks probing questions to reveal the candidate's thought processes and actual behaviors in real situations
 - "Why did you take that approach?"
 - "Tell me about the steps you took, and why each was important."
 - "How did you address that challenge?"
 - "In retrospect, what did you learn from that experience?"

Note: Not all questions need to fit the behavioral interviewing technique!!

Benefits of Behavioral Interviewing

For employers

- Identifies the best person for the job
 - Reduces training and development time
 - Increases productivity sooner
 - Improves probability of retention
 - Harmonizes individual and institutional goals

For candidates

- Better match of skills to the job
 - Increases job satisfaction, self-esteem, self confidence
 - Fosters direct contribution to organizational goals
 - Identifies the organization as a place to build a career

See handout for list of interview questions rated as poor, fair, and good.

Introductory Question – How Good Is It?

"Tell me about yourself."

POOR

- Demonstrates interviewer lack of interest, skill, or preparation
- Candidates may feel obligated to give a life history, which does little to demonstrate job qualifications
- May be viewed as a way around illegal questions

Introductory Question

"Can you give me a synopsis of your education, experience, and skills that you think prepare you for success in this particular position?"

FAIR

- Demonstrates some lack of interviewer preparation but begins to ascertain some relevant information.
- Time would be better spent on specific questions that will help uncover details of experience and application of skills

Introductory Question

"I see from your resume that you've negotiated contracts in your two most recent positions. Can you tell me a little more about the kinds of contracts you've negotiated and especially experiences you've had in negotiating contracts with foreign companies?"

GOOD – Even better with additional probes

- Acknowledges that interviewer has read the applicant's materials
- Gives applicant opportunity to provide additional detail in areas that are important to the position
- Specific desired experience can be verified by professional references

Working with Others

"Tell me about your experience working with teams."

POOR

- No candidate will freely discuss bad team experiences—but you want to know what he/she would do in such a situation
- Most people think they are a great team player, even if they aren't
- Does not delve into how the candidate behaves in a team

Working with Others

"Can you tell me about a time when you worked with a colleague or team to solve a problem?"

FAIR

- Gives some insight into problem solving, but may not reveal whether or how much the candidate contributed to solving the problem
- May not reveal how the candidate interacted with team members to overcome the problem

Working with Others

"Tell me about a difficult team member you worked with. What made the relationship difficult? How did you navigate the relationship? What did you learn that will help you deal with other difficult people in the future and keep your team on-track?"

GOOD

- Provides specific detail about how the candidate approached a difficult situation with a team member
- Provides some indication of how the candidate might approach a similar situation in the future
- Provides some insight into the candidate's ability to assess his/her own emotional intelligence and/or behavior

Strengths/Achievements

"What single project or task would you consider your most significant career accomplishment to date? Walk me through the plan, how you managed it, how you measured its success, and what the biggest mistakes you made were."

GOOD

- Gives a sense of candidate's prior success and sense of ownership in the task
- Interviewer can ferret out detail about how the candidate approaches a challenge and how he/she learns from experience
- Shows candidate's level of confidence in his/her work and professional choices and his/her ability to be humble an give credit to others

Weaknesses/Challenges

"Tell me about a failure you've experienced and how you dealt with it."

FAIR

- Question is vague and lacks context
- May elicit answers that are not job related
- Leaves the definition of failure to the candidate
- Does not go far enough to determine how the candidate used the experience to prevent similar failures in the future or to pro-actively address the root of the failure

Weaknesses/Challenges

"Tell me about a time you made a serious error or omission at work. What did you do to remedy the situation? What did you learn from the experience, and what actions did you take to prevent the same thing from happening again?"

GOOD

- Gives the interviewer insight into candidate's willingness to take ownership of, and learn from, his/her errors and omissions
- Reflects on the candidate's ability to recognize problems and take remedial and preventive action
- Raises a red flag if the candidate blames others or gives a "fake" error or omission (something like "I worked too hard and burned out")

Good Questions About Preferred Work Environment (with additional probes)

- "Tell me about the things that made your previous jobs/organizations frustrating. How did you deal with those frustrations? ..."
 - Helps uncover what makes the candidate happy at work, which may predict how long he/she will stay in the role
 - May be validated by professional references
- "What most satisfies/satisfied you about your current/most recent job? ..."
 - Begins to get at what motivates the candidate
 - Answers may shed light on what the candidate found most frustrating (i.e., opposite of satisfaction factors), especially with some follow-up questioning
 - May be validated by professional references

The Hypothetical Situation: Use Sparingly and With Caution

Hypothetical situation questions can be useful in assessing

- How well the candidate thinks on his/her feet
- The candidate's workplace ethics

Cautions:

- The scenario may not include enough information for the candidate to respond in the way that you think he/she should
- Most candidates know at least part of a "proper" response, but their answers may not be indicative of how they will actually respond in a real situation

Better Approach: Formulate good behavioral interview questions and drill down for details to ascertain behavior in similar past situations

Just Plain Bad Interview Questions (and Why)

If you're a new addition to the crayon box, what color would you be and why?

- May be creative, but these kinds of questions provide no information about onthe-job performance
- Can work against an individual who lacks the ability to be quick on their toes with sharp answers to irrelevant interview questions but otherwise is highly skilled
- Why are you leaving your current employer? (If the applicant is employed)
 - Candidate may not provide a truthful answer
 - Question does not focus on how the candidate's skills and abilities can serve the university's long-term vision and its strategic objectives.

Just Plain Bad Interview Questions (and Why)

What is your salary history (or what salary do you expect)?

- Puts candidate on the defensive and in fear of elimination if he/she shares this information
- Not germane until an offer is made; previous salary should have no bearing on new position
- Offer should be made to the top candidate based on the university's policies, values, and financial situation
- I'm interviewing four other people this week for this job. Why should I hire you?
 - Puts candidate on the defensive to "sell" him/herself
 - Asks the candidate to compare him/herself with others about whom he/she knows nothing
 - Candidates will likely talk about their soft skills, but the question doesn't elicit examples of application of those soft skills

See handout for examples of a good, and a not so good, set of interview questions.

Reference Checking

- Ask for at least five professional references (from work or volunteer history); check at least three
 - Personal references can't provide much useful information about work experience
 - Sometimes difficult to get in touch with references
- If allowed by HR, consider asking if the candidate has any objection to the interviewer contacting other individuals with whom both are familiar (i.e., professional network members)—but not his/her supervisor or close co-workers unless that explicit permission is given
 - Remember that a candidate will only provide references who will give glowing reviews
 - This is why behavioral interviewing is so important

Reference Checking

- Prepare a <u>brief</u> explanation of the position duties so that references have some context for your questions
- Use interview questions as a basis to formulate questions for references; probe just as in the interview to ferret out accurate information and real behaviors
 - Questions to check accuracy of information provided by candidate
 - Questions to verify behaviors reported by the candidate

See handout for sample questions for references.

Handout Contents

- Presentation Slides
- A Tale of Two Position Descriptions (the original description)
- RACC Body of Knowledge
- GPCI Validated Competencies and Skills
- Soft Skills Inventory
- A Tale of Two Position Descriptions (the rewritten description)
- A Recently Posted Financial Position Description
- Interviewing IQ Quiz
- Behavioral Interviewing Information University of Delaware
- Interview Questions The Poor, The Fair, and The Good
- Interviewing IQ Quiz The Answers
- Example: A Generally Poor Interview
- Example: A Generally Good Interview
- Example: Good Reference Questions