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Identifying Areas for Improvements in the Hiring Process at the Environmental Protection Agency

IDENTIFYING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN THE HIRING PROCESS AT THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

Background

The mission of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is to protect human health and the environment within a viable economic setting. EPA employs 18,000 people across the country. More than half are engineers, scientists, and policy analysts; a large number are legal, public affairs, financial, information management, and computer specialists. Today there is a keen need for engineers and scientists in government, but it is no easy task to compete with the salaries that these well-educated and technically astute individuals can command in corporate employment. Universities beckon as well. In addition to that competitive environment, the federal government faces another challenge: to hire the best qualified professionals in an efficient, timely manner.

OPM invited EPA to partner in an unprecedented review of departmental hiring policies and practices and devise a strategic approach to identifying areas of improvement. EPA responded, engaging in a self-assessment that identified strengths in its hiring process and opportunities to build on. The assessment identified areas of improvement that, if not addressed, could hinder the progress EPA has made in developing a timely hiring process. For example, EPA fills vacancies within an average 29 days based on OPM's 45-day hiring model. However, the assessment revealed that in some cases the process can still take as long as 141 days.

The Approach

The clock was set for a three-month deadline to complete the hiring process review. An interagency team met regularly with the goal of enabling EPA to immediately improve hiring timeliness. The team developed a high-intensity, information-gathering process and assessment framework to reveal the weak spots in EPA's hiring process.

A step-by-step process map was created from internal documents and interviews. These maps were compared to the OPM 45-Day hiring model to see how closely aligned EPA's hiring process was and to identify changes that could be implemented to streamline the process.

OPM conducted focus groups over an eight-week period to explore problems and barriers in a frank and detailed manner. Interviews were conducted with individual HR staff, hiring officials, and new hires in managerial, clerical, technical, administrative, and professional positions to create a fully rounded picture of how hiring had been done and what were the strengths and weaknesses of the process as seen from a number of perspectives.

The team used additional resources such as the EPA's Human Capital Audit Report and EPA's 2004 Action Plan to compile the information that would allow them to complete the analysis and delineate recommendations.

Challenges

The interagency team discovered that EPA could improve its hiring process and outcome by focusing on three main categories of issues:

• **Communication, both internal and external**

• **EPA resources**

• **The pace of hiring**

Communication

Lack of communication about constraints in hiring and opportunities for new approaches was pinpointed as a major obstacle to efficient and effective hiring. For example, one manager related how he had interviewed 10 ranked candidates and preferred the seventh-ranked one, only to find out later that he was limited to select only from the top three candidates. The candidate had been flown in for an interview only to find out later that the manager could not hire her. Having to hire his second choice and not his first choice left the manager dissatisfied.

Clearly, improving communication between hiring managers and HR staff is essential. Managers complained that they rely entirely on HR to inform them about changes in the hiring system and processes. Without HR outreach, education, and training, hiring officials in the field had little knowledge of creative tools such as hiring flexibilities.

Several recent hires commented they received quick feedback about their applications at the beginning of the process, but heard nothing else throughout the rest of the process until a job offer was made. Sometimes the offer came months after the initial contact. Some recent hires reported becoming discouraged while waiting for the final decision on the Federal job and began considering other employment. New hires reported that the online application process was overly time-consuming and the questions were redundant or unrelated to the needs of the specific job.

Automation and HR Resources

EPA has invested in an automated hiring system to provide a more efficient way of recruiting and processing good quality candidates. Yet, as one hiring official stated, "Automation of functions has not resolved the problems." Parts of the hiring process are still handled manually, such as the SF-52 process, creating delays and frustration.

All focus groups reported some concern with the candidate evaluation system. Because the system relies on self-certification, managers feel they don't always get the best candidates because applicants might not be truthful in all their responses, and the best candidates aren't adequately culled from the group because of the way they self-certify. Even if staff was to manually evaluate each application, most HR specialists do not have the technical and scientific knowledge necessary to evaluate applicants' job qualifications in a meaningful way.

In addition, many managers are unfamiliar with the full capabilities of the automated system. For example, some managers reported that they thought they could only use "canned" questions that came with the system. They didn't know they could import their own specialized questions to the system that would screen for particular expertise. Also, in some cases, managers have sought to use a panel of experts that would interview applicants based on a specific area of expertise. The current automated system does not provide for that kind of specialized candidate evaluation.

Hiring officials indicated impatience with tasks that are handled manually, an indication that they may not fully understand what the automated system is able to do and what must be done manually by staff. The misunderstanding stems from the higher number of applications for EPA positions that the automated system is able to channel – in many cases quadruple the number of applications that was typical before automation. At the same time, the HR staff has not increased at the same rate and still must manage the larger manual workload.

Other issues emerged from the interviews and focus groups that might never have been discussed to such a degree before, such as competing priorities, the use of the GS model, and the staff time needed to initiate a job posting internally.

Inefficient Process

New hires said the hiring process at EPA is slow. The reasons behind the slow pace became clear during the interviews. For example, communication is inefficient and inconsistent. Hiring officials do not offer appropriate incentives such as recruitment bonuses and student loan repayments (usually because they don't know they have that authority). On average, there are 88 days between initiating an S-52 and filling the job. Some regions take as long as 141 days. In some regions, the hiring process is timely but information is incomplete, meaning that not all steps are being tracked. That makes it impossible to identify best practices that could be used by other regional offices.

Mechanisms to capture feedback about the hiring process are not in place. These mechanisms would provide information to allow EPA to drive a continuous improvement effort to achieve the ultimate goal: optimization of the hiring process.

Recommendations

As a result of this broad-based introspection, EPA outlined strategies that it believes will have the greatest impact on improving the hiring process, with the recognition that no improvement can be considered fixed forever. At EPA, as with any other agency, of course, a successful makeover depends on unconditional support and commitment by its leadership to continue the self-assessment and adjust processes as necessary over time.

Improve communication

Broadening and deepening communication both inside and outside the organization is key. Establishing efficient communication channels among hiring officials, HR personnel and applicants is vital. That same audience is hungry for regular information from HR about policy changes, best practices, and little-known details about hiring – including various flexibilities and incentives that can help draw talented science professionals to federal employment. This communication can happen by scheduling regular, facilitated discussions among all stakeholders in the hiring process, holding recruitment strategy meetings for each vacancy, and developing a management feedback mechanism to assist HR in evaluating the hiring process and implementing changes to ensure ongoing improvement.

Focus HR resources

Technology can definitely facilitate the hiring process. However, EPA's existing automated hiring system is not sufficiently tailored to EPA's specialized technical areas so it is more attractive for HR staff, hiring officials, and applicants to use. In addition, if HR restructured some of its functions, it could create a team specializing in hiring for the most hard-to-fill technical positions.

Improve the process

Improvement is not one single intervention. The focus is to ensure data-driven assessment and continual plans of action are in place so new processes don't slip back into old habits over time. Two mechanisms have been identified to provide the necessary data to adequately plan for such adjustments: one mechanism would measure hiring process timelines and the other would measure the satisfaction of hiring officials, HR staff and new hires.