

Important Steps to Hiring Well

The best way to prevent employment-related problems is to hire well in the first place. While finding the right person can take some planning and patience, it's 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.

The best place to start is to truly know what you need in a candidate. Take some time to consider the qualifications that have made others successful in this role and be sure to review and update the job description. An accurate job description supports several steps within an effective recruitment process. (See the January, 2016 *VLCT News* article [“Ten Reasons for Job Descriptions”](#).)

As you start your search, don't forget to 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.*

While this article reviews important aspects of the hiring process, space does not permit more detailed information about human resources best practices, compliance with state and federal employment laws, or the requirements of the Open Meeting Law and Public Records Act. Through our Human Resources Assistance Program, we're writing documents and developing tools to help municipal officials with the steps recommended below. Visit the [HR Assistance program webpage](#) for job description templates and other information.

Plan ahead to ensure consistency. Treat applicants in a consistent and non-discriminatory manner by following the same steps for all. When planning your search process, it helps to know or decide in advance specific tasks and who will be responsible for carrying them out. Examples include:

- What is the pay range?
- Who will write job postings and advertisements?
- Which application materials will be requested and will there be any testing or skill demonstration required, particularly of finalists?
- 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, including number of rounds?
- Who will craft interview questions to be posed of all candidates?
- Who will make the actual hiring decision, and will others be involved to provide input?
- Who will conduct the background and/or reference checks?
- How can all search materials be kept secure and confidential?

Don't panic if you don't know the answer to these questions or how to address them. We're here to help, so contact the Municipal Assistance Center at info@vlct.org or 800-649-7915.

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 touting what makes your municipality an attractive place to work. For more details on job advertisement and posting ideas, see the April 2016 *VLCT News* article, “[What to Include in an Employment Ad](#)”. 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 their application materials were received. Email is a quick way to send an acknowledgement and thank you to every applicant. Municipalities often let applicants know the general steps and timing of the search process and apprise them once an individual has been hired. Communications with unsuccessful applicants are best kept simple and polite. In the case of unsuccessful interviewees, a personal phone call or more tailored rejection letter is most appropriate.

Screen and interview. It can be helpful to use a spreadsheet or other electronic tool to compare applicant information with the job qualifications. Use the job description as the basis from which to craft lawful, job-related 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 convey to candidates why they should 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 their job application will be kept confidential, especially if they are currently employed. Plan a confidential process so you don’t breach that trust. (See “Can a Selectboard Conduct Employee Interviews in Executive Session?” on page ___.)

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. Again, all questions should be job-related to avoid unlawful discrimination.

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. (Further information is available in the [VLCT-PACIF Drug and Alcohol Testing Manual](#).)

For certain positions, it may make 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 notice and sign-off requirements.

Be patient. It is ideal to have a backup plan, if possible, with a well-qualified second or third choice, in the event your first choice candidate does not accept your offer. However, when there are significant doubts about those in your candidate pool, it is better to wait and not hire anyone. It is important not to hire out of a sense of desperation. Consider bringing on temporary help while you pause and evaluate your search process to see if there are any improvements to be made. When a first recruitment attempt fizzles, a second effort usually brings success.

This is the first in a series of VLCT News articles on effective hiring practices. Future articles will provide more detail on topics such as interviewing techniques.

Jill Muhr
VLCT Human Resources Consultant