



Hire Education: U.S. Department of Education

The Department of Education's (ED) hiring challenge is the same one confronting agencies government-wide: it simply takes too long to hire qualified employees. With more than \$65 billion in grants and student loans at stake, touching everyone from children to adults, ED literally cannot afford to wait six months or longer to hire its most critical employees.

Last year, the Department updated its Strategic Human Capital Plan based on feedback from leaders and managers across the organization. The most commonly cited source of aggravation among those interviewed was the hiring process, and it became apparent to ED's leaders that the hiring status quo was not acceptable. The number one goal in the resulting plan was to "Fix the Hiring Process."

When ED joined the Extreme Hiring Makeover (EHM), its HR team had already been engaged for the better part of a year in developing new tools and techniques to improve the process, but struggled to effectively engage their managers in the process. Faced with filling approximately 500 vacancies a year, ED wanted to gain a better understanding of its hiring process and determine whether there was a better, more efficient way to recruit and hire.

CHALLENGES

THE COMPLAINT HEARD GOVERNMENT-WIDE: HIRING TAKES TOO LONG

Whether their previous experience came in the public sector or the private sector, the common refrain among ED's leaders and managers is: hiring takes too long, the process is overly complex, and, despite the time and effort required to navigate the process, the candidates it delivers do not always possess the skills and experience required for the job.

We Do All of This to Hire One Person...

To get to the bottom of ED's time-to-hire, the Extreme Makeover team took an in-depth look at the process itself. While hiring processes vary among ED's 19 program and staff offices, the team focused its initial process review on the largest program office within ED – Federal Student Aid (FSA). FSA employs about 25 percent of ED's total workforce; it is also the government's first Performance-Based Organization (PBO), and has some Congressionally-granted management flexibilities that allow it to be more nimble. FSA therefore served as an ideal pilot for a process reengineering effort.

In addition to reviewing existing process maps, recruiting and hiring rules, guidance, plans, tools and other relevant documents already collected by ED, the Extreme Makeover team conducted interviews and focus groups with senior leaders, hiring managers, administrative officers, HR, new hires and others – over 30 individuals in all. These interviews both validated the anecdotal accounts of ED's hiring challenges and provided a more nuanced picture of the process as it operates at FSA.

Based on the information gathered through the interviews, the team developed a detailed process map that reflected every activity, requirement and hand-off associated with FSA's hiring process. The map shed some light on why the process was taking so long: it consisted of 114 discrete steps, and over 45 hand-offs between managers, administrative officers and HR specialists.

The mapping exercise was eye-opening for all involved. When the process map was rolled out, it spanned an entire conference table. Color-coded boxes – with different colors assigned to each of the

participants in the process – served to highlight the fact that there was no one “culprit” for the problem: the steps were roughly split between leaders and managers and their HR teams. Layers of approvals wove up and down throughout, and there was no clear owner of the end-to-end process.

...And We Are Still Not Satisfied

While the sheer length of the process might explain why hiring was taking so long, it did not address the other major concern about the process: delivering enough highly qualified candidates to managers.

Here, too, the interviews provided insight into the root of the problem: managers were generally disengaged from the hiring process. Their interactions with HR at the outset of a hiring action focused almost exclusively on defining the position’s occupational series and grade level (i.e., “I need a GS-14 Program/Management Analyst”), rather than on the essential education, skills and experience required for success.

Absent a strategic front-end conversation between the hiring manager and HR to clearly define the job – not just the job series, but the major duties associated with the position – most job postings consisted of dense, jargon-laden language pulled directly from generic position descriptions. Vacancies did not clearly describe the duties associated with jobs, much less the competencies required to be successful in them. Assessment questions were developed based on this same, generic information, and as such were not consistently effective in screening out unqualified applicants.

Managers would receive certificates and be unable to find any truly qualified candidates to fill the position. The managers would then sit on the certificates, not make a selection, and ultimately re-post the position – resulting in a longer time-to-hire.

SOLUTIONS

STREAMLINING THE PROCESS

The Chief Operating Officer at FSA was the first to take up a pen and excise some of her steps, challenging the team to streamline the process by eliminating redundancies and steps that did not add value. In addition to reducing the time required to hire, the process reengineering provided an opportunity to integrate new steps that would address quality concerns – specifically, to introduce a greater level of position-specific job analysis (in the form of more strategic conversations with hiring managers) into the front-end of the process.

FSA assembled a team comprised of administrative officers, HR specialists and managers to examine the existing process, segment by segment. Viewing the process as a collection of four discrete tasks – establishing a position, marketing and recruiting, assessment and selection, and making a hire – the team developed proposals for more streamlined and efficient ways to complete each phase in the process.

The changes needed to improve FSA’s internal management processes were clear cut, and most steps were condensed or eliminated in one of three ways.

- 1. Consolidating the flow of information between the hiring manager and the HR specialist into a single, strategic front-end conversation.** Traditionally, the information required to advertise for vacancies and assess candidates has been collected piecemeal over the course of dozens of steps. In the new process, hiring managers and HR professionals have a comprehensive conversation at the outset of a hiring action to generate all of the information needed to better attract, recruit and select the best qualified candidates. The EHM team developed a simple interview guide to help HR specialists elicit all of the key information needed.

2. Replacing e-mail chains with meetings that engage all stakeholders.

At numerous points throughout the existing hiring process, tasks such as developing and approving a vacancy announcement required eight or more steps because of excessive back-and-forth among managers, HR and administrative officers. The process reengineering team's proposal replaced e-mail chains with conversations wherever possible, cutting dozens of steps from the process.

3. Asking senior managers to prepare – and follow – annual staffing plans. Just obtaining permission to fill a position required five steps in the existing process. The redesign team proposed that FSA unit leaders submit annual staffing plans outlining the number and type of employees they plan to hire over the course of a year, as well as budget and FTE justifications for those hires. Approved by the senior leadership team at the beginning of the year, managers would then be empowered to hire according to those guidelines without seeking additional approvals. The plans would be revisited at least quarterly to adjust them as needed.

The next step was to apply the lessons of FSA's process redesign Department-wide. While all stakeholders agreed that the process mapping had been a valuable and worthwhile undertaking, it had required a significant time commitment from hiring managers and HR resources from both FSA and the Department. Not wanting to re-invent the wheel in each program office, ED looked to smart solutions to help spread the knowledge gained through FSA's experience for the benefit of the entire department.

To jump-start the knowledge-sharing, the EHM team hosted a three day Boot Camp for HR representatives, Executive and Administrative Officers and hiring managers from across the Department. Day One of the Boot Camp outlined the fundamentals of the new process. Participants contributed a range of ideas and insights to the session, revealing that they had already been experimenting with some new approaches – the Makeover effectively enabled the Department to capitalize on the best of what its program offices had already introduced. The second and third days of the Boot Camp training dealt with creating compelling job postings and with assessment, respectively.

FOCUSING ON THE FUNDAMENTALS***Requiring Managers to Drive the Process***

The enhanced front-end conversation had general applicability to all of ED, and an interview guide developed by the EHM team was introduced broadly across the Department-wide during the Boot Camp.

This seemingly simple change to the way ED conducts its hiring process will pay dividends at every step of the process – from reducing the time required to navigate the process, to creating clearer and more compelling vacancy announcements, to ensuring that candidates are assessed according to appropriate and meaningful criteria. The front-end conversation is therefore the cornerstone of all of ED's efforts to improve the way it hires.

Selling ED Opportunities to Job-Seekers

ED's vacancy announcements, like those at many agencies across government, are too often remnants of old vacancy announcements. This runs the risk of reflecting the hiring needs of 20 years ago, rather than the critical talent needs of the Department now and for the future. Job duties and requirements are described in the language of government HR professionals, making them difficult for job-seeking professionals from the public or private sectors to understand them. Applicants are left scratching their heads, unable to assess whether or not it is a job they want, let alone one that is a good fit for them.

To assist ED's HR team in creating clear, compelling, plain-English vacancy announcements, the EHM team developed a template – designed to work with the USAJobs five-tab format – that includes an outline for creating vacancies, as well as prompts, examples and hints to guide HR specialists. ED team members participated in a creative workshop to learn the fine art of marketing jobs. Through the workshop, the ED team developed language that describes the agency's vital mission and work in an engaging and persuasive manner.

Improving Candidate Selection

The improvements to the front-end of the process will help the hiring team create a better selection strategy. HR Specialists will more clearly understand the nuances of the position and important selection components. In addition, the ED HR team has been working very closely with their Quick Hire professionals to overhaul their screening questions across many common job families. This effort will pay real dividends in enhancing quality of hires.

For technical positions, the HR team has enlisted the help of subject matter experts from the program offices to fine tune the selection process. For these hires, technology will jump start the process, but advice and counsel from experts is expected to make a noticeable difference in critical skills assessments.

Finally, the Department is adjusting its policies and updating its technology applications to enable it to utilize category rating later this year.

What Gets Measured Gets Done

One of the projects ED had in process even before the Extreme Hiring Makeover was the creation of a hiring tracking system that could be used across the Department. The ED HR team has continued to refine that tool to allow for precise measurement of process success and issues.

RESULTS

Although their results are still preliminary, ED is prepared for success. First, consider the results of FSA's hiring process reengineering efforts: the elimination of more than 50 percent of its internal management activities. Cutting its process steps from 114 to 53, FSA demonstrates to agencies government-wide that the hiring process need not be a maze of confusion. As FSA learned, most of what is needed to streamline hiring is within agencies' purview to change.

Just as important, ED has a roadmap for streamlining and strengthening the foundation of the entire Department's hiring process. ED's management and HR team is embracing the changes, and the challenges of implementation. Building on the tools and technology ED had been developing prior to the start of the Extreme Hiring Makeover, there is a new suite of resources available to HR and others.

Most significantly, ED has overhauled the questions in the EdHIRES system used to assess applicants for more than half of its occupations. That means that managers and HR now have access to effective on-line applicant questions linked directly to the skills needed for success on the job. The anticipated result when fully implemented: it will be more difficult for applicants, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to "game" the system and appear qualified when in fact they are not.

LESSONS LEARNED

The most critical lesson for ED coming out of EHM: change is possible, but it is not easy. Successfully improving the recruiting and hiring process requires a commitment of time and effort on the part of leaders, HR, managers and others touching the process.

ED has made tremendous progress in the year since it embarked upon this project, and much work still lies ahead. Armed with a roadmap, ED has everything it needs to see the change process through to completion. ED's EHM team knows that the Department's continued success will hinge on the energy it invests in these efforts.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Implementation. ED has an aggressive action plan to roll-out its streamlined processes, test new approaches, and pilot the use of available hiring flexibilities. Over the next two months, the Department will pilot the new process and tools with a half dozen non-bargaining unit positions. Results of those pilots will feed the final process, tools and technology updates Department-wide.

At the same time, ED will continue refining and upgrading its technology. In addition to improving the content of the EdHIRES system, ED is scheduled to update the technology itself to make job postings more visually appealing to job-seekers and easier to navigate for HR and support staff.

ED is drafting a policy that will enable it to use category ranking in place of the rule of three where appropriate. Once the draft policy is complete, ED will pilot this flexibility and assess its effectiveness and impact. Following union outreach to ensure compliance with its collective bargaining agreement, ED will implement category rating Department-wide.

Although there is work left to be done, ED has already taken significant steps toward demonstrably improving the timeliness and quality of its hiring process. Not only has ED paved the way for other agencies – showing what can be possible – it has paved the way for its own long-term success. When its makeover is complete, ED will have a process that ensures the Department recruits and hires the experts needed to lead our national investments in education.