Panel Games

Much of the Ivy League eschews interviews when filling posts, says Amanda Goodall, and UK universities keen to hire the best should follow suit.

Academics pride themselves on being objective. Yet when it comes to job interviews, objectivity frequently goes out the window. The interview process fosters prejudice and irrational assessments of candidates that can lead to the best not being hired. Institutions in the UK often lose sight of the fact that it is they who need the candidate, not the other way round. Interview panels behave as if they are doing the candidate a big favour.

Should we now be following the trend in the US, particularly in the Ivy League and at many research-intensive universities, and getting rid of interviews for academic hiring? I think so.

Even with the most fair-minded interview panel, choosing the right people is difficult. Academics are hired to do research, to teach and to administer; these are skills that are arguably impossible to assess in an interview.

I have spoken to a number of senior professors who collectively have spent numerous hours on hiring panels. Their criticisms of hiring committees focus on the arbitrary yet personal nature of comments, the lack of knowledge that panellists have about candidates' work - some don't read it before interviews take place - and the tendency for those on committees to want to hire people who are like themselves.

"In my experience, the great majority of academics on hiring committees have not even looked at the papers before the candidates arrive in the room," says one of the academics I spoke to (all of whom asked to remain anonymous because they still sit on interview panels).

"This is one reason why they tend to be so influenced by personal things and by the candidate's performance on the day. In academia, the information that comes through an interview is of marginal importance to the actual job they will be doing. Most information is gleaned from a CV, by reading an individual's work or by attending a seminar where presentation and communication skills can be observed."

Another professor concurs. "As the world's top universities do not use job interviews for academics, why are we still bothering? When I was hired at (an Ivy League university), I got 10 minutes with the dean of arts and sciences. The key thing was to give a job talk and then to go around and meet with individuals in their offices to discuss work."

In the UK it is not uncommon for a department head to spend hours working with a search committee to track down the perfect candidate, only to lose him or her at the interview stage.

"Some of the craziest things happen when there is a sole candidate who everyone knows is a brilliant person that the university would be very lucky to hire. When folk sit on a committee, power goes to their head - 'the big I am' - and they forget that they are trying to persuade the star to come to them.

"This is where the Brits get it so wrong and the Americans get it right. In the US, departments go out of their way to woo academics they want to hire, and their institutions, deans and human resources people help them. In the UK we are stuck in a 1920s mindset, as though we are doing you, Professor Z, possible Nobel prizewinner of the future, a favour when we offer you this post."

A world-famous scientist recalls: "The most ridiculous interview I ever attended was at (an ancient UK university). There were about 12 (interviewers) in a line in front of me. The end people were looking in my ears. To the best of my knowledge, only one person in the room had ever read any of my work. This happened about 20 years ago. The chap appointed sank without trace."

I was once told that a particular contender was not hired because "we felt he was a publishing machine". (I wish, I thought to myself.)

"Did the professor in question give you any reason to think that he was incapable of doing anything else but publishing?" I asked. The answer was "no".

I had understood that improving research was a priority for the department, which did not do well in the last research assessment exercise. So why was this outstanding scholar not hired? Could it be because his publication record was so much better than those of the members of the panel?

The complicated topic of what motivates humans to select certain individuals over others is rarely discussed in universities. Yet the selection and retention of faculty members is a main element in institutions' success. Like-for-like hiring (related to homophily, or "love of the same") is common. As the literature on diversity in ethnicity and gender reveals, individuals are more likely to hire others who are similar to themselves, even though the decision may be entirely subconscious.

Just last month, a study of academic appointments at Spanish universities, written for the Foundation for Applied Economic Research, showed that "the gender composition of committees strongly affects the chances of success of candidates applying to full professor positions...In quantitative terms, for a committee with seven members, an additional female evaluator increases the chances of success of female applicants by 14 per cent."

Humans may find it hard to hire people who are better than they are. It is possible that the selection of a better scholar will alter each person's relative position within the group. A US-based dean observes: "A judicious leader is someone who is capable of hiring people smarter than themselves. I have on occasion met faculty who put the institution above their own position and chose to appoint someone better than them. But it is not common. It's a natural human reaction to find it difficult to select someone above you."

That people select others who are like themselves is a form of assortative matching. It may be comforting for individuals, but is it efficient for organisations? A UK vice-chancellor suggests that it is not.

"I was recently on an appointment committee where the academic department doing the recruiting thought that they (in the department) were better than anyone else did. Three candidates were shortlisted. The department representatives picked the opposite order of

candidates to the rest of the appointing committee. They put the worst candidate first. I think they did this because they were weak researchers and therefore lacked confidence."

A common problem with faculty hiring committees is that academics are not given training in employment law or in interviewing, things that might make them aware of their own biases. Also, undertaking objective research in this area is difficult because of issues of confidentiality. Nevertheless, as hiring is key to the success of universities, we should make it possible for researchers to collect data.

Getting rid of interviews will not solve all the problems, but it will reduce the possibility that a few people might mess up hours of searching and schmoozing done by department heads and deans. Hiring should involve CVs, academic references, job talks, meetings with potential colleagues and finally a vote by department members or judgement by the chair. The final decision will still need to be ratified by senior academic leaders who must ultimately decide whether the candidate is good enough.

The result will be vastly improved quality control.

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