

HOW TO HIRE THE VERY BEST PEOPLE TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE ANYONE

When you begin your career, the assistants and postdocs you hire can either greatly accelerate or substantially stall your progress. Additionally, you are usually limited by resources to hiring just one or two people, so it is especially important to select these individuals with great thought.

I have developed an approach that is quite successful for hiring technicians or assistants, although it is somewhat time-consuming. It is well worth the investment of time spent (I learned the hard way). In general, the amount of time you need to spend on hiring for a certain position depends on how large your lab or clinical research project is and how central a role this person will play in your research enterprise. I generally allow 4-6 months to find an outstanding research technician (SRA). The best time of year for hiring is generally January to May, when college seniors are looking for a job after graduation.

A. Your new job description must first be submitted to your Department's Human Resources Representative, where it will be reviewed and then posted on the UCSF job website. If there are preferential re-hires (people who meet the qualifications of your job description and who have been laid off at UCSF), you will be required to interview these candidates before receiving new applicants.

Note bene: most new hires to UCSF will have a 6 month probation period, during which time you can request approval to let the person go if performance is not satisfactory.

There are circumstances that preclude or dramatically shorten a probationary period. If your candidate has prior UC service (within the last 3 years), check with your Human Resources Representative to have their employment history reviewed. Prior service in "limited" (non-career) staff positions can fulfill probationary time even though it is not time spent working for you. Also, rehiring someone during their period of recall (they have been laid off and the referral is not through the preferential rehire process), they will NOT have a new probation period. It is well worth the time to check, because once a 6-month probation time is already fulfilled, the person will not have another 6-month probation period after they begin working for you.

This is extremely important to understand. You can (and should) request to see the personnel file of any internal candidate or preferential rehire, and you can request a 6 month probation period for preferential rehires if they were separated by a layoff before you hire them, but this must be clearly understood and documented. It is equally important to carefully and skillfully check employment references, both within the University system and in outside industry.

Employment histories can be complex and should be carefully checked so that you fully understand whether you would be hiring this individual with a "safety net" (in the event it doesn't work out) or without one. Employment references can usually be obtained,

though some can be tricky and you should ask your HR Representative for help if you are not sure you are getting accurate references from valid sources. These references provide critical information in selecting the right candidate, and are a valuable resource in deciding whether to retain them, in developing a training plan for that candidate, and in managing their performance once they pass probation.

You may also wish to list your position with agencies outside UCSF, such as Craig's List. This is a fairly economical way to get a large number of qualified applicants, but the downside is that it takes time to screen them all. On the upside, people from outside of UCSF are more likely to see your position posted on Craig's List than on the UCSF Website.

B. Once I start getting applications, I triage them into 4 piles:

- 1) call immediately
- 2) contact
- 3) maybe
- 4) no (circular file)

E.g., the majority of the ~ 50 applicants I get for an SRA position will be in category 3 and 4; very few, if any, will be in category 1. For the 10 or so in category 2, I send them an email:

Dear _____,

I received your resume for an SRA position in my lab, and I am very interested in talking with you further. My lab studies the molecular pathogenesis of Bartonella, the gram-negative pathogen that causes cat scratch disease and other diseases that are especially severe in AIDS patients. I was wondering if you are still looking for a position and if so, in what type of position are you interested (in terms of degree of independence), and for what duration? Will you be moving to SF, and when would you be available to start?

Sincerely,
Jane Koehler

Many PIs find that any time less than two years is very suboptimal for the project, thus those unable to give a ≥ 2 year commitment are not considered further.

Dear _____,

Thank you very much for your reply. Because it usually takes awhile for newcomers to the lab to get into their projects, it generally works best for me to consider people who can commit to two years. If your plans change and you would be able to work for two years, please let me know. Best wishes for your [grad school] endeavors.

Sincerely,
Jane Koehler

C. If the information received from the candidate matches with the project's needs, then I arrange for a phone interview (perhaps 6-8 candidates); for those competitive for a final

interview, I schedule a meeting in person (~2-3 candidates). The phone interview enables me to find out more about the goals and personality of the candidate; the in-person interview gives me the chance to discuss our projects and for them to meet the people in the lab.

For the phone interview, I have found that the following questions are very informative:

- 1) What kind of job are you looking for and what do you wish to accomplish in your new job? What would you like to avoid in your new job?
- 2) What are your long-term goals? (grad school, med school, etc)
- 3) Are you willing/able to make a two-year commitment to this project?
- 4) I'd like to learn more about your previous research project(s). (look for ability to clearly describe goals of project, how project was executed, and what conclusions were drawn; get a sense of candidate's understanding of project and their accomplishments on the project)
- 5) What were the greatest challenges during your project, and how did you resolve/deal with them?
- 6) If you were able to start your project from the beginning again, what would you do differently?
- 7) What do you enjoy most about working in the lab? What aspect(s) do you like the least?
- 8) You've worked with several bosses...how would you describe your best boss(es) and your ideal boss?
- 9) What characteristics do you like least in a boss...how would you describe (hypothetically) your least ideal boss?
- 10) What do you consider are your greatest personality and professional strengths?
- 11) We all have areas in which we would like to improve...what do you consider are your greatest personality and professional weaknesses?
- 12) What do you think your boss would say are your greatest personality and professional strengths and weaknesses?
- 13) If your boss asked you to do something one way, and you disagreed, how would you handle this situation? (try it boss' way, then if it doesn't work, discuss your way and that you'd like to try it and why)
- 14) If you were doing your planned work and your supervisor then asked you to take care of a specimen that came in unexpectedly, what would you do? How do you react to such interruptions?
- 15) Did your previous job require you to supervise or teach new techniques to others? What did you like or not like about that experience?
- 16) If you needed to develop a new protocol, how would you go about doing that?
- 17) What would you do if there were one piece of equipment in the lab that is shared, and you and a lab colleague often need to use it at the same time?
- 18) What would you do if someone in the lab was using up supplies and not reordering them, even after you've talked to them about this several times before?
- 19) What do you find the most frustrating about working in the lab?

- 20) What are three major challenges you faced in your last job, and how did you handle them?
- 21) What are your reasons for leaving your last job?
- 22) Are there other jobs that you are considering at this point?
- 23) Is there a time line for you to have a decision about this job?
- 24) When would you be available to start?
- 25) Do you have anything you would like to add, and do you have any questions for me?

D, Questions for the candidate's references: it is absolutely essential that you contact at least 3 different references for the candidate. Remember that references from a PI and from a person in the same lab are not usually independent. It is useful to talk to both, especially the person that works most directly with the candidate, but the information from the PI is often based largely on the feedback from the more junior person. The value of talking with the PI lies in his/her ability to rank the person relative to others in the same setting.

- 1) How long did she work with you and in what capacity?
- 2) What is your overall impression of her work and her as a person?
- 3) Is she motivated and passionate about her work?
- 4) What are her weaknesses? Is she able to take criticism well?
- 5) Does she work quickly and efficiently?
- 6) Does she understand the projects given to her?
- 7) Does she think things through well?
- 8) Does she ask questions with reasonable frequency (not too often or too infrequently)?
- 9) What is her degree of experience?
- 10) What is her ability to trouble-shoot problems that arise?
- 11) Is her work reproducible?
- 12) Does she document her work and results adequately?
- 13) Are her written notes well organized, comprehensive and easy to follow?
- 14) Is she able to work independently, with minimal/moderate supervision?
- 15) Is she reliable and someone you can count on?
- 16) Is she well organized, with good attention to detail?
- 17) Is she flexible? How does she accommodate changes in plans or sudden additional work that was unanticipated?
- 18) Is she frustrated easily? What things frustrate her? How does she deal with her frustration?
- 19) How does she react if you and she disagree about an approach to a problem?
- 20) Does she work well under pressure, such as when a major deadline is approaching?
- 21) How does she get along with and work with others?
- 22) Does she have a sense of humor?
- 23) What are her reasons for leaving the position in your group?
- 24) Do you have a sense of what her long-term goals are?
- 25) What do you think is her potential to achieve those goals?

- 26) Is she someone you would hire again? (this question alone is often the most helpful)
- 27) How would you rank this person compared with other people at her stage of training and experience with whom you have worked?

E. Vacation and Sick Leave Transfers from Other UC Campuses

Please note that if the person is already a UC employee on any campus, they will have accrued vacation leave and sick leave. If the employee transfers to your lab from another lab at UCSF, make sure that your HR Representative receives a vacation leave transfer for the appropriate funds from their current employer to your account so that you have sufficient funds to pay for any vacation leave. The funding for sick leave is not transferred. For long-term employees, the amount of money for vacation leave can be significant and you will want to make sure the credit is transferred where possible. However, when an employee transfers between campus locations, the financial credit is not currently transferred. So, if you hire an employee from UCLA, for instance, the vacation liability funding is not transferred across to the UCSF campus and credited to your grant, yet the employee does get “credit” for the accrued vacation and sick leave balance figures when the personnel file is received by UCSF. Thus, if the employee transfers to your lab and then leaves a year later, you would have to payout all unused accrued vacation. Note that this policy may change in the near future, so be sure to check with your HR Representative before making the hire.