

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN JOB SEARCH PROCEDURES

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### ABSTRACT

The job search process would benefit from the dissemination of more information regarding (successful and unsuccessful) candidates' qualifications. In the case of fair job searches, unsuccessful candidates getting specific feedback on why they were incompatible with the advertised position would help the hiring process to seem more objective and less capricious. In other searches, a more open process would either encourage increased fairness or allow inequities to be proved more easily. While a job application is arguably more important to one's career than a funding or telescope proposal, only the latter two result in any feedback whatever. This seems a serious inconsistency. This poster makes some suggestions for improving the system.

### 1. PROBLEM

#### *1.1. Not All Searches are Fair*

Because any applicant can be rejected on the basis of "incompatible research interests", conscious discrimination is easy to conceal. Even those who intend to be fair have little guidance about how to ensure that minorities and women are given thorough consideration. The following supposed controls on the hiring process really do little to ensure that a typical job search will be fair. In fact the current system is so secretive that there is no way for a particular search to be reviewed by outside parties or even for statistics to be gathered about searches as a group.

- Ads in the AAS Job register must say AA/EOE in order to be published. But these initials do not guarantee that proper procedures are followed because there is no enforcement of the rules. Certainly the AAS does not monitor each search. There is no way to know whether the employer really means it, or whether they just put the initials there because they have to.
- Currently, there is absolutely no systematic way for an applicants to know why they were not chosen or why the person hired was chosen. Because no one except the search committee knows what went on, there is no opportunity for external evaluation of any particular search or of searches in general.
- If you have access to non-public information and have reason to believe that you were discriminated against, it is very difficult to prove. Official grievance procedures are slower than forming an M star and to prove a violation requires an large quantity of evidence of blatantly discriminatory behavior. However, the biggest problem is disparate treatment due to oversight. Most search committee members are not Human Resources personnel, so they are often unaware of what constitutes fair treatment with regard to Affirmative Action. Instead, they try to do a job that they didn't really want in the first place with the minimum amount of effort and,

as a result, women and minorities may not be considered with the appropriate care and sensitivity. Such a search will not satisfy the spirit, if not the letter of Affirmative Action, but no one will ever know.

### *1.2. The Current No-Feedback System Is Unsatisfying*

Most rejected applicants get a simple form rejection letter saying either that there were many excellent applicants or that there was a research specialty incompatibility, or both. Especially for ‘junior’ level people (post-docs, assistant professors) this lack of explanation leads to the (perhaps incorrect) conclusion that the job search process is capricious, irrational and too subjective. Proposals for funding and telescope time get more feedback than job applications.

## **2. HOW THE SYSTEM CAN BE IMPROVED**

If more information about job searches was made public, then interested external parties could evaluate whether or not searches were fair. Conscientious employers could set an example for employers that want to improve. Some suggestions for information which should be available are listed below.

### *2.1. Things That One Might Like to Know When Applying for a Job*

- How many jobs advertised in that department in last five years?
- How many jobs advertised at that institution in the last five years?
- How many people were actually hired?
- How many women were hired?
- Perhaps these statistics should be published in the job ad.

### *2.2. Responsibility of the Search Committee During the Search*

Lists of finalists should include at least 25% women (rounded to the next higher integer) and one minority. If the “top” candidate is a white male, then the most qualified female and minority candidates’ applications should be submitted for approval (of dean, provost, etc.) with that of the first choice candidate. If he does not take the job, then, if the second choice is also a white male, it should be clear that he is more qualified than the most qualified woman or minority.

### *2.3. Information That Should Be Available After the Search*

- Rejection letters should state the name of the person that was hired (many places do this already). Or, the name should be published promptly electronically or in the job register.
- Rejection letters should state how many females and males were interviewed as a fraction of the total number of applicants. This information would, among other things, make public the number of women in a given job pool.
- Rejection letters should also contain a brief explanation of the successful applicant’s strengths. This way, the unsuccessful applicants would have some information about what made the successful candidate “more qualified”.

- Once a job search is complete, the information mentioned above could be published in the Job Register (as a prerequisite for allowing publication of another ad in the Job Register).
- Rejection letters, should contain comments on the applicant's qualifications for the particular job. Affirmative Action guidelines require that search committees submit this type of information (for women and minorities) in writing to the institution's affirmative action officer. Making this information public will encourage forthrightness in this process.
- The barest minimum that should be required is: for each person that is hired, the employer write a statement specifically and thoroughly explaining the strengths of the successful candidate and submit the statement to the AAS. Preferably, this statement would be available to anyone or at least to all applicants for that job. If no one was hired, then this should be explained.
- A statement of the qualifications of all finalists for a job would be even better. One thing that would be discouraged by this procedure is the selection of "straw woman" finalists. Also, it would allow verification of the consistency between the requirements stated in the ad and the qualifications of the finalists.
- Measures should be adopted to ensure that not only is an advertised position bonafide and not promised to anyone (as is required for publication in the Job Register) but that the position is not strongly intended for anyone either.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Job seekers as well as the scientific community would benefit from several changes to the current secretive job search system. Unintentional and blatant discrimination would be discouraged by requiring feedback to job applicants similar to the feedback given to proposers for telescope time and funding. Rejection letters should contain specific feedback about the strengths and weaknesses in of the addressee's application. At the very least, the name and qualifications of the successful applicant should be made public (in rejection letters, Job Register or statement to AAS).

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