

Hey, can we be a little nicer to job applicants and stop treating them like crap?



Hi everyone. I am in Washington DC giving a keynote at the [Nonprofit Talent and Culture Summit](#) on the importance of our sector's investment in our most valuable resource: Sticky dots. No, just kidding: our professionals. So this post may be kind of hastily written, since I must find and put pictures of cute baby animals on my PowerPoint deck. (An entire post will be written later on the strategic deployment of cute baby animal pictures). Today, I want to talk about being nice to job applicants. After doing lots of hiring, talking to friends who are applying for jobs, and having applied to jobs before ([#OxfordCommaForever!](#)), I realize just how demoralizing it can be out there for job candidates. A colleague told me he had three interviews with a panel of grumpy-ass people, got berated for asking a question "out of turn," and didn't hear from them for weeks. This was for a half-time entry-level position. WTF. There are tons of tips out there for job applicants about how to stand out and improve their chances of securing that dream job. Today, let's bring some balance. We in the nonprofit sector pride ourselves on equity, community, and social justice. And yet we still have some terrible habits that we need to break. For some reason, probably because of the power dynamics between employers and job applicants, otherwise-awesome organizations sometimes treat candidates like crap, like "others" instead of potential partners in our shared quest to create a better world. This often mirrors the injustice we nonprofits feel when treated like "others" by funders due to the power dynamics in funding. Our sector relies on purpose-driven, hardworking, versatile professionals. Even if they are not a good fit for our organization, all of us have an obligation to the field to ensure that good candidates remain in the field and grow into their potential. The fate of our community depends on it. I asked the [NWB Facebook community](#) for input on what we can do to treat our professionals with respect so they don't run screaming into real estate or other professions (no offense to real estate or other professions). Here are 20 things we can do. This is not a comprehensive list. Please add your suggestions in the comment section.

1. **Disclose salary on job postings.** I've written about this before (["When you don't disclose salary range on a job posting, a unicorn loses its wings."](#)) This is the number one most frequent comment. Stop wasting everyone's time, and stop perpetuating inequity against women and people of color, who are unconsciously punished for being assertive when negotiating.
2. **Don't ask for salary history.** Seriously, this archaic and disgusting habit needs to die. Yes, I said disgusting. Salary history is like ancient, moldy hummus; it has no place in our sector. Talented people who are underpaid should not continue to remain underpaid while those who are paid well continue to get paid well, especially when there are clear racial and gender disparities regarding compensation.
3. **Don't play games with candidates if you are determined to hire internally:** I know sometimes legally you have to post a job, even if you have someone internal in mind. Be transparent. If you have a preference for internal candidates, state that on the job posting and let candidates decide if they want to

compete.

4. **List desired skills and required skills separately:** According to this [article](#), women often don't apply for a job unless they feel they are 100% qualified. Not so for dudes, who will apply even if they feel like they're 60% qualified (I'm still waiting for American Ninja Warrior to call me back). Separating out required from desired skills may help bring some balance.
5. **Auto-reply confirming receipt of applications:** Yeah, you may not have time to personally confirm every application. So set up an auto-responder so that candidates don't freak out and get into this existential crisis of "Oh God, did they get my application? Should I call them? They said not to call. But what if they didn't get my application? I should show initiative. But what if I'm being too pushy?"
6. **Knock it off with the automatic eliminators like typos.** As I wrote in "[Our hiring practices are inequitable and need to change](#)," it is inequitable to use automatic eliminators. Diverse candidates like me who grew up in other countries speaking other languages may have more typos than those who grew up here, but they/we will have other strengths. If you have a hard rule like "I eliminate all covers and resumes with any typos" or "I drop all candidates who don't write a thank-you note," don't wonder why the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives sucks at your org.
7. **Stop requiring formal education as a default:** Another point I've talked about earlier, but it bears being repeated. One of our sector's biggest goals is to address educational inequity. It is hypocritical then that we use education as a way to filter out people. If a job does not require a specific skill or certification (like an MSW for a counseling position), then see if experience will stand for formal education. Our default in this sector should be to NOT require formal education unless needed.
8. **Post clear process, including ending date and preferred job starting date:** Lay out your proposed hiring timeline and what it entails. If you plan to do two rounds of interviews, spell that out. If you will require some sort of assignment or writing samples, spell those out. Do not add extra steps mid-way through.
9. **Knock it off with the drawn-out process:** Yes, I know the common concept of hire slow, fire fast. But some of us are taking it way too far with the hire slow part. Do not make candidates do 10 rounds of interviews, meet personally with every board member, and write a three-act play based on your org's strategic plan or something.
10. **Stop requiring a resume and cover and then a separate application that spells out the same stuff as the resume.** It's irritating. I know there are legal advantages to requiring an application, but think about when in the process you may require that. Maybe the first screening step is just the resume and cover, and candidates who move forward may be required to fill out the application (spell that out in the process).
11. **Be on time and prepared during the interviews.** Respect candidates' time. It's ridiculous if candidates get penalized for being a couple of minutes late, and yet the interview panel starts late or didn't print out the questions in time or whatever.
12. **Share interview questions.** Interview questions are getting more and more complicated, and this bias towards on-the-spot thinking disadvantages the thoughtful, deliberate thinkers that every effective team needs. Giving questions ahead of time does not hurt anyone, especially if you want good answers to questions like "Tell me a time when you were able to shift a dysfunctional systems paradigm using

quantum principles of race relations.”

13. **Stop being holier-than-thou during interviews:** Why do supportive, down-to-earth organizations with a great sense of humor suddenly get huffy and intimidating during the interview process? Wouldn't you want candidates to see what they're actually going to be experiencing if they work for you? If you're normally friendly and warm, be friendly and warm when interviewing people. Remember that applicants are interviewing you as much as you are interviewing them.
14. **Stop asking for ridiculous assignments that require a ton of work:** A couple samples of previous completed work can give great insight into a candidate's accomplishments. Asking them to do brand-new, complex assignments—"Based on your understanding of our organization, please write a 10-page development plan complete with contingency plan and a draft theme song for the gala"—is out-of-line.
15. **Be transparent:** About challenges of the position, about what you love about your job, about failures that happened and what your team learned from them. I've found that when both candidates and nonprofit respect each other enough to be forthright about the positives as well as the challenges, it makes for much better matching.
16. **Be flexible and understanding:** This is a trait of our sector of which we should be proud. Offer evening interview times for those who may not be able to do day-time, and try to empathize when things happen. As one colleague puts it, "Remember that every candidate is a potential customer or advocate. I was asked to reschedule an interview due to a sick baby and never heard back..."
17. **Consider barriers to candidates with disabilities.** Says a colleague, "Do you want folks with disabilities to apply but your interview requires several flights of stairs, a long walk, and sitting without a break for 3+ hours?" Also, do your essential duties really require lifting 50lbs or driving? Be clear, because you may be eliminating awesome candidates with disabilities from even applying.
18. **Communicate often, and get back to people on time with your decisions:** This is a frequent and justified complaint. The waiting and uncertainty are the worst. Let candidates know your process, and if it deviates, get in touch with them. Sometimes it takes longer than expected to make a decision; if that's the case, email people, apologize, and let them know what the new timeline was. It is better to get an outright rejection than to stand at the abyss of silence. Says a colleague, "I once drove to interview in person three times, a four-hour round trip, and they never notified me. Ugh."
19. **Deliver bad news by email, with option for phone conversation:** All candidates you interview deserve the courtesy of a personal notice. There is some debate about the best way to notify candidates who didn't get the job. Some just prefer any notification at all. After doing this for a while, I recommend sending an email (with "Regrets from [your org] on [position]" as the subject line) and offer a time the candidate can call to talk to you on the phone, or ask them for times they are free for you to call. For many people, the shock is too much and they need some time to process before talking to you.
20. **Give feedback and be supportive:** I know, there are liabilities involved regarding being too candid. But I wonder if we have become so worried about potential litigation that we neglect all the positive stuff that may come with being supportive and honest with candidates. I always offer to give feedback to candidates who make it to interviews, as well as when appropriate to introduce candidate to other orgs, and everyone has been tremendously appreciative. I hope no one sues my org, but I think it's worth the risk to have candidates who feel respected and who may continue to remain and grow in our field.

These are just a few tips that we as a sector should think about following. There are others. We need to shift our perception of candidates as people who are lucky if they get a job with us, toward the belief that all of us are working toward building a better world. The success of our work depends on our people. Let's treat everyone with consideration and respect and let's live out our principles of equity and community. Next week: Hey job candidates, stop doing these dumbass things!

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