

There is no substitute for experience

A good manager needs experience, being capable isn't enough. This point was driven home to me during a recent job search conducted at the University of Central Arkansas. An academic

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department was seeking to hire a professor. The department chair had to decide when to have the search committee begin conducting zoom interviews with candidates.

The chair had two reasonable approaches. He could start the interviews early, before the national meetings where job candidates typically have their first interviews. Or, alternatively, the chair could wait until after the national meetings were over and only interview the candidates who remained on the job market. Unfortunately, both strategies have convincing reasons why they might work.

Starting the job search early is a good strategy for the employer if potential employees are risk averse. A candidate might be willing to take a sure mediocre job offer rather than risk being unable to land a superior offer later. There is a lot of evidence that people are risk averse. Here are two: First, people buy various types of insurance to remove risk from their lives. Second, they only purchase risky assets if they get a higher expected return than they could from a safer asset. A department chair, making the mediocre offer, could take advantage of a job candidate's risk aversion and make an early offer. The department chair might use this strategy to get a high-quality employee. A job candidate might

take the early offer but not accept the same offer later when his or her other offers were coming in. Given this, it makes sense for UCA's department chair to start the interviews early.

On the other hand, starting interviews late may be a good idea for two reasons. First, many people overestimate their abilities. Some studies show that 90 percent of people think they are above-average drivers. Most people also believe that they have above-average intelligence. Many of these people, obviously, are wrong. A department chair could take advantage of the overconfidence of job market candidates by waiting to start interviews. The people with unrealistically rosy forecasts of their job prospects will be left without a job later in the hiring season. Such a job candidate will accept an offer from UCA late in the hiring season that he or she would not have accepted early on when that job candidate still hoped to land an even better job.

A second reason to start interviews late is that hiring committees do not get accurate information. A job candidate who hopes to go to an elite research school will not reveal this information during an interview with UCA. Talk is cheap here. Job candidates will say what they need to say to get the search committee to give them a job offer. The search committee is reduced to guessing the job candidates' true intentions. By waiting to interview late, UCA's department chair has an advantage. The job candidates who are able to get the high-paying jobs at elite research schools have done so. These schools hire early. The remaining candidates can be believed when they say that a school

like UCA is what they are looking for (at this point those will be the only schools still looking to hire faculty).

As you can see, either strategy – interviewing job candidates early or late – can sound like a good idea. The only way to find out the best strategy is to try both strategies. This year, at UCA, the department chair started his department's search early. The department made several offers that were turned down. The job candidates claimed to love the school when they visited. But these job candidates were really hoping to land a more lucrative job, so they turned down our offers. One of these job candidates, who rejected UCA's offer, recently contacted the department chair to ask to be reconsidered for the position. This candidate was clearly a victim of his own overconfidence. UCA's academic department made its own misstep by interviewing early. And having failed to hire early, UCA's academic department had to start their interview process over. By this time, they were starting their interviews late and look to have a good chance of having a successful search.

UCA's department chair learned through experience which hiring strategy would work. In case you are wondering, I am that department chair. Next time, I will know to start interviewing later, rather than earlier. All managers will make some mistakes – like I did by starting the interview process early. However, this is just the process of these managers learning which plausible sounding strategy is really the best course of action.

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