

Student Staff—*n.* an energetic, brilliant, creative, talented potential rolled into a food-driven, sleep-deprived, unmotivated creature who wears dirty clothes

Karen McRitchie
Grinnell College
Information Technology Services
Grinnell, Iowa 50112
(641) 269-4531
mccritchi@grinnell.edu

ABSTRACT

Students are a wonderful resource for any department of a college or university, especially an ITS department. They are inexpensive and abundant. They want to work at strange times. What more could you ask for? The problem is that it is important to dig out the good ones from the population. Finding the right student staff is just as important as finding the right full time staff. Even though you may only employ them for three or four years, it is still important that they are good employees and many departments let things slide because “they are just students and they’ll be gone.”

Conventional methods of hiring and training in a corporate situation are not what will work in this strange academic environment. At Grinnell College, a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, the student hiring and training process was modified and developed into an extremely successful model. The ITS department employs approximately 60 students, 25% of them are hired each year. There has only been one student fired in the past five years and only a handful of disciplinary problems. If a good process is in place for hiring and training students, the end result is a good student employee and a good return on the department’s investment.

The Grinnell process development involved student staff, ITS staff and the college’s Career Development Director. The process was modified due to a claim of cultural discrimination by a student that was not hired as an employee. After the old process was examined, changes were made and the students that are hired may still be those dirty clothes wearing creatures, but they are excellent employees.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Project and People: *staffing, training*

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

SIGUCCS '03, September, 20-24, 2003, San Antonio, Texas.
Copyright 2003 ACM 1-58113-665-X/03/0009...\$5.00.

General Terms

Management, Performance, Legal Aspects

Keywords

Student staff, interview, hiring, training, management

1. INTRODUCTION

All colleges and universities hire students into their labor force. They are an excellent human resource: low wages, varied availability, and usually a creative group. They can also become a management nightmare as they are a transitory workforce and they often need to work independently.

At Grinnell College, with approximately 1400 students, the Information Technology Services department employs between 50-60 students. There is about a 15-25% yearly attrition rate, so each year 9-15 new students are hired. The hiring and training process is ongoing, with a new group hired each semester. These students will usually remain in their college job for 3-4 years, so it is still important that you hire the best people. Often, in colleges and universities, the standards are relaxed because these are labeled “student jobs.” Problems are often ignored because the students will be leaving eventually.

At Grinnell College, the ITS student staff is paid \$7.20 per hour and \$7.75 per hour in a supervisory role. There are four student supervisors who get paid the higher wage and when students work as mentors, they are given the higher wage for their mentoring time. Students also seem to have such varied schedules and free time that there is never a shift that is empty. The ITS student staff uses an online schedule and time clock that also posts sub-shift requests and even the 2am shifts are taken. What some might consider negatives to hiring students, the Grinnell College ITS department works to incorporate and support.

2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

There was a satisfactory hiring process in place which served to find students to interview and hire for the training program. The process had some informal features, such as sending out rejection letters explaining why they were not hired. The reason for this was to educate the students who were not hired, so they might apply again in the future or at least learn for future interviews.

The ITS student staff at Grinnell College is approximately 28% international students. The total college's student body is approximately 16%. International students have always been a large part of our student staff.

In the fall 2001 semester, there were two brothers from an Eastern European country who both applied for the ITS training program. When these students applied, there was no screening process of applicants and everyone got an interview! This was a tedious, unnecessary process; however, it meant both of these students were granted an interview. As part of our "trying to be nice and educate students" attitude, a letter was sent to the students explaining that they had not been hired. In the letters it was stated that they did not seem "approachable."

When they questioned their rejections, because they believed that they were qualified for the program. It was explained that the students are selected relative to the other students. It did not mean they were not qualified, but that 12 other students were more qualified. When they asked what it meant to be "approachable", a clear definition was not provided, nor was one available. They were judged on the quality of "approachability" and yet it was a difficult characteristic to define. Friendliness, courtesy, ability to look welcoming...what should it be?

They applied the next semester and were rejected again, this time they filed a complaint claiming "cultural bias" against the ITS department. Meetings were set up with the students and the Director of International Students; they were not satisfied with that dialog. Mediation was arranged with Student Affairs and that was not satisfactory. "Approachability" was the main issue and it was not easily definable, yet there was no instance of cultural bias. This was a program that hired many international students and there were even other students from their same country who were employed. Student Affairs wanted to make sure that our hiring process did not discount them for cultural reasons. For example, it is culturally impolite for a Japanese person to look someone in the eyes at first meeting, so would it be judged as a negative trait because they did not make good eye contact in an interview for employment in the United States?

In defense of ITS, this is the United States and there are certain interview practices that are standard. Is it a disservice to the student not to educate them in the standardize practices? When they go for a job interview at a corporation, will they claim cultural bias if not awarded the job?

The students were not satisfied with the outcome of the meetings, so they filed a complaint with the Director of Human Resources, who investigated the complaint and found no discrimination. The complaints were resolved in favor of ITS, but it also caused some reflection on the hiring process for students and this began the redesign.

3. PROCESS EXAMINATION AND REDESIGN

3.1 Examination

The first step was to examine the hiring process to determine what changes should be made. The Director of Career Development, Steve Langrud, assisted with this task and provided information to redesign the hiring process.

3.2 Conventional hiring methods

How many have been asked or ask the standard interview question "What are your strengths?" or "What did you like about your last job?" Many interview questions have become so standard that they are asked at most interviews regardless of the type of job. There isn't any significant information that is gained from such questions. Answers to such questions can be "designed" and can sound good regardless of truth.

When many applications are received, most are divided up among staff to evaluate. There is little or no consistency. A person could be passed over because the evaluator didn't like their name or where they went to college.

3.3 Ask questions that will give you information

Trying to stay away from standardized practices, the first important part of the redesign was to develop questions that actually provided useful information. The wording of the question needs to allow for a detailed answer rather than yes/no. The questions should directly relate to the job requirements. If customer service is part of the job, create questions that will provide information about past customer service experience. For example, ask the question "Tell me about a time when you provided "over and above" customer service." Do not ask the question: "What customer service experience have you had?"

The "tell me about" question will allow the interviewers to evaluate verbal communication skills, organization of thoughts, customer service attitudes, customer service experience and even promote other questions from the details. If a question asking about experience is posed, this is simply an opportunity where one can list various customer service related jobs. This information can be found on the applicant's resume'.

3.4 Past performance predicts future performance

An applicant's past performance will predict their future performance. By listening to the details as an applicant tells about a past experience or how they might handle a specific situation, an interviewer can gauge what performance to expect. Design the interview question to allow a detailed response. What information does one receive when given an answer to the commonly used question: What did you like about your last job? Is the applicant's answer going to include a response such as "I liked that I could cruise the internet for a couple of hours when the supervisor was in meetings?"

3.5 Use of a scoring system

A scoring system was recommended for evaluating applications and interviews. This is a basic system that assigns a numerical value based on the answers on the application and performance at the interview.

The application scores determine who will be invited for an interview. The interview scores determine who will be hired into the training program.

One of the advantages of a scoring system is that if there is any question regarding the applicant's status, the score can be

checked. The ambiguity is removed and answers to questions about hiring are not based on memory.

3.6 Consistency

One of the most important parts of the hiring process is consistency. The same staff must evaluate every candidate or application. This does not mean that every person in a department must sit in on the entire interview for each person. Parts of the interview could be assigned and a staff member would only repeat their portion of the interview or application and score only their section.

It is human nature to have some bias. Sometimes bias exists without any recognition. For example, if a staff member is critical about certain characteristics, they will be consistently critical. This is the key. The person may be a tough “grader” but they will be tough with all the candidates. Their score may be lower than other interviewers, but when the average is calculated, the numbers will be accurate across the pool.

The main idea is to be consistent with all applications or candidates during the interview so that each of the candidates is scored using the same standards. What often happens is that due to time limits, one staff member might interview a few candidates, then, another takes over on the next group. The interviewers’ standards may and usually are, different, so candidates are scored at different standards. If human nature is factored into the system, the evaluation is fair to everyone.

4. APPLICATION PROCESS

It is important for the application to have pertinent general information, but then also have questions which help you “weed out” the best candidates.

Write a detailed job description, outlining the expectations. The candidates need to know what to expect in the job, from this description. The advertisement for the job is the way to tell potential applicants what your expectations are and what will be further discussed at the interview.

At Grinnell College, the ITS department gets approximately 30-40 applications each semester for between 7-10 openings. In the past every applicant was interviewed! It was horrible and took days to get to everyone. No one remembers why it was done that way; it just was the way things had always been handled. Now each question on the application is scored on a 0-3 scale. The number of interviews is determined by calculating half of the graduating seniors, plus 2. Then the applicants with the highest scores are invited for an interview.

After experiencing the complaints from the two international students about cultural bias, the personal information on the application is now removed and replaced with a number. The staff grading applications does not know the identities of the applicants which avoids any bias based on sex, culture, race or even peer knowledge.

5. INTERVIEW PROCESS

The interview design is based on the job and the number of staff that need to participate in the interview. For example, if a person is being hired for an accounting position, they would need to interview with a group of staff, including those people who would

supervise them. Each person would interview the candidate based on his specific expertise. For instance if fundraising was part of the job, then someone with fundraising experience should develop the questions and interview the candidate about fundraising only. How many times has a potential candidate answered the same questions with each person they are to speak with? If each interviewer develops questions and then scores those questions, then all of the scores are combined for the top candidates. Discussions can then decide who will be hired for a job using the scores as a basis.

With student staff, a shorter version of the same process was used and students were included in the interview process. Both the ITS staff administrator and three to four students were present for each interview. The questions related to job qualifications and a spontaneous presentation was required. For example, a candidate was asked to give a five minute presentation on a hobby or interest. This would let us see preparation, organization, teaching ability, communication skills and other qualities. We ask the candidates to “tell us about...”customer service experience, tutoring, problem solving, and computer experience. We ask them to tell us how they would define being “approachable” and give us examples of what they might do so students will come and ask them questions when they have a problem with their computer or application. The point is to ask questions that are creative and will give back information that specifically relates to the qualifications of the job. The standard interview question, “what did you like about your last job” just doesn’t provide any meaningful information.

The interview questions are scored on a 0-5 scale. The answer to each question is scored by the interviewer and several general questions such as “I understood this candidate” are also scored. The scores are tallied and then an average is determined from each of the interviewers’ scores.

The scores are entered on a spreadsheet, then after all the interviews, the top *X* students are hired. A letter of rejection is sent out to the ones who did not get hired, only explaining that “relative to the other candidates” they were not hired. An explanation of why they were not considered or how they could do better is not allowed due to past legal issues. Applicants are not allowed to know their scores or the scores of the other applicants. The scoring system protects the department from being accused of bias in the hiring process and if legal proceedings ever developed, the scores could be used to demonstrate the objectivity of the process.

6. TRAINING PROGRAM

There are three parts to the training program. It is approximately six weeks in duration, but has flexibility in scheduling to allow for varied student schedules. The training program is moderately difficult, but the purpose is to not only provide basic training for student staff, but also to “weed out” those who should not be hired.

There is an initial training meeting (pizza party) which is required and all trainees are told the expectations of the job and given the training outline. The first project is assigned. The trainees are all paid for their training at \$6.75 per hour.

6.1 Projects

Each student is given a project for each of the weeks of training. The project is a challenging one and the trainee must utilize existing knowledge to complete them or attend tutoring for assistance. One suggestion by students, who had completed the training when we required them to attend an actual session for each project, was that often they were already experts in an application and the training was boring and unnecessary. So now the project details are presented, then the student has two opportunities during the week to meet with trainers for assistance. Those who know enough to complete the projects don't need training unless they get stuck and those who need training can receive assistance.

Customer service and problem solving training are the exception and a required session. The problem solving course is titled "Booby Trap Lab" and the trainee has to sit down at a computer that has been set up with a particular problem and figure out what is wrong. The second part of the lesson is that they need to know how to fix it. This is always a good learning tool.

If we lose trainees, it is mostly due to incomplete projects. All projects must be completed and passed to be eligible to take the consulting test.

6.2 Mentor program

From the current staff, mentors are solicited and then a trainee is assigned to each mentor. The purpose of this is to put the trainees out in the job with someone who already knows the job and will assist them with questions from actual students.

Each mentor is given a list of tasks that the trainee needs to complete, ranging from refilling paper trays to reconnecting computers to the network. Mentors are also required to evaluate the trainee and any qualifications that they feel should be improved are noted and additional training time may be arranged.

The trainee needs to complete all of their mentor shifts to be eligible for the consulting test.

6.3 Consulting test/interview

Once all projects have been passed and mentoring shifts have been completed, the trainee is eligible for their Consulting Test or

CT. This is a practical exam where the student role plays with student staff "pretending" to need assistance. Each student is given the same CT and they are graded on their responses, questions, abilities and customer service skills.

If they pass this exam, they are hired at the full pay rate and are eligible to sign up for substitute lab shifts for the duration of the current semester and regular lab shifts beginning the following semester.

7. RETURN ON INVESTMENT

If a good process is in place for hiring and training, there will be a good return on investment for the ITS department. A selective hiring process will hopefully invite only qualified students for interviews. A good interview process will give a good pool of students for training and a successful training program will provide student staff that are qualified.

It is much better to spend the time "weeding out" those students who should not be hired than to spend time afterward on disciplinary actions and coaching. If a student can't balance their projects and class work, then they should not have a campus job. If a student is unreliable during training, they will most likely be those who are unreliable on the job. It is better to find out with only a small training investment, than to hire and then have to work on their job skills.

In the past 4 years, with a workforce of approximately 60 students, there has been only one termination and there are only a handful of disciplinary issues, mostly regarding tardiness or missing a shift.

Students are their own animal. They are a terrific resource if you have processes in place that will work with them instead of trying to make them fit into traditional business processes. Once a student is hired, other certification programs are offered: helpdesk, library, linux lab and resnet. This program provides an excellent reference for future jobs and they can learn a lot of practical skills that will be used after graduation. The program works with the negative aspects of a student work force rather than trying to change what they are, even if they do wear dirty clothes.