

# Session Topic: **HIRING AND MANAGING PEOPLE**

## Discussion Leader: **KARL GLAZE BROOK**

The aim of this session was to analyze the key process of hiring and managing people and describe how to optimize it. It is a key topic since at some point we will be doing much of our science through the people who we hire and manage. If we do not have the right people our science will suffer.

### **First part of the Session: HIRING PEOPLE (how to conduct a job interview and how to answer the questions...)**

Two mock interviews were arranged. Scenario: two students applying for the same PhD position. The panel was composed by three of the postdocs attending the meeting and the two “students” were Bryan G. and Karl G.

Standard questions:

- Why did you apply for this particular position?
- What can you give to this project?
- Can you give us a specific example of a problem you solved?
- What type of computers and programming languages do you use?
- What can you tell us about the three main pieces of instrumentation you will use in this project?

Outcome:

- “Bryan”: weak at presenting himself in terms of professionalism, but shows competence & dedication when asked about detailed experience.
- “Karl”: unspecific, bit self-absorbed, quotes grades instead of any practical experience, but has better physical background knowledge and broad interest in astronomy / facilities.
- Panel decision: technical skills better for this particular project (observational), hence pick Bryan.

Comments:

- Bryan G: many students give poor answer to questions such as Windows experience being computing experience and not having a basic understanding of the instruments involved.
- Both students had little good reason why they picked that particular university.
- Brian B: clear definition and addressing (in interview) of selection criteria helps greatly to select candidates apart.
- Bryan G: for postdoc hiring, being science-driven will be the dominant criterion. Technical skills will not lead a candidate to publishing papers.

Hiring panels summary:

- Brian G was clearly better candidate for hands-on research
- Impressed by Brian Gs example of a problem he solved in research
- Karl G had little research experience, though had good marks

- Overall the job was for a hands on researcher, so Brian G was favored
- Brian G could work on coming up to speed with the theory more easily than we could get Karl to come up to speed with the research skills

Top questions from poll:

- Why did you apply to work here?
- How do you think the project would benefit from your expertise?
- Where would you like to see your career in the next 3-5 years?
- What are your future research goals?

Other typical and very important questions:

- Why are you doing a PhD?
- Where do you see yourself in the future?
- Tell us about your experience working in a team. - It is critical to know how to handle difficult situations that may arise while working in a team.
- Experience with teaching / student supervision?
- Do you have any questions for us? - Always answer 'yes' to this question: it shows initiative.

NO GO questions: never ask to a candidate personal questions.

Recruiting part 1: Students

- Grades differ from research ability (and poor grades should not be ignored).
  - Research experience / astronomy tools used?
  - Why apply in astronomy? Do they know what they are in for?
  - Why work with \*you\*? Did they do their homework? Did they do research with you?
- Darren C: if going for a job with a talk try and personalize the talk for the institution.

Recruiting part 2: Postdocs

- Do you know the letter writer? If in doubt, phone call!
- Did their PhD research have impact? How original / creative? Independent?
- Do they have a good research plan? Do you want a super star? i.e. some jobs do not require the best and brightest but are better filled by a moderate skilled candidate
- Have they heard of you? Done their homework?

- Brian B: saying "I don't know, I'd ask others with experience" is okay. It is better to admit that you do not know, especially when you are new to a place, and ask someone with experience rather than ramble and pretend to know.

## **Second part of the Session: MANAGING PEOPLE**

New students: Managing them...

- Be prepared for time commitment - 4 to 5 hours per week.
- Should have written thesis plan, ideally one page summary before start.
- \*Schedule\* regular meetings ("door is always open" often will not work).
- Student should have more than one supervisor and another senior student mentor.

### Management: Basics

- Your Behavior (quite important) - What are your habits? How do you react in situations / to bad news?
- Achievement: You set the targets - Make them achievable.
- Recognition: everyone likes to be appreciated.
- Motivation: leadership & vision - Research should be challenging - Share dull tasks around, do some yourself.
- Assign responsibility.
- Advancement - What happens next?

### Progress meeting:

- Positive reinforcement / criticism better than negative.

### Different leadership styles depending on the individual:

- Control (progress reports) vs laissez-faire, sliding scale in between.
- If style tension is inevitable, live with it.

### You CAN:

- Provide pointers to the literature.
- Give them good ideas.
- Enthusiasm and motivation.
- The scientific big picture.
- Help with small details.
- Build team.

### You CANNOT:

- Be a parent.
- Be available at all hours.
- Write their papers for them.
- Provide step by step guidance.
- Teach how to write / program.
- Guarantee them a job.

### Difficult situations:

- Student that cannot progress.
- Proposed research is not being accomplished.
- Personality / resource conflicts.
- Unethical behavior.

### TIPS:

- Avoid email to solve conflicts.
- Avoid getting personal, involve person in solution.
- Formal systems and structures can help you.
- Prevention rather than cure.
- You cannot solve everything.
- Astronomy is not life & death.

### Questions at the end:

#### How to deal with personal situation (e.g. taking maternity leave) during a job interview?

- Do not answer any personal questions. If necessary, try to deflect the question and / or

state clearly that you are not supposed to answer this kind of questions.

If you hire a student or postdoc with a different style of works, how do you deal with that?

- Keep the focus on the project. If the work is done then it is ok. (it is a kind of style tension). If the different style is effective ok, if it is not then you should address the problem.

Final Comment:

Discriminations are often based on the fact that a supervisor does not take into account that his / her PhD students or postdocs may have different demands due to personal situation.