

The Presidential Search: Sticky Wickets

Recently, an attractive presidential candidate had completed several campus visits and a series of interviews with the Board and Search Committee of the hiring institution while providing extensive references. He was at the point of informing the board chair of his current college that he was the first choice when contract talks broke down. The obstacle? His total compensation package was tens of thousands of dollars more than the hiring institution was prepared to pay.

Such a scenario is all too common. The perils and pitfalls of the search process could consume an entire volume, but based upon our experience as both candidates and search consultants, there are three common junctures at which the process often becomes derailed.

Assessment — The initial screening process, including the campus visit, when both sides are evaluating the “fit” while refining and clarifying mutual expectations.

Compensation — The total “package” presented to the successful candidate, including salary, housing allowances, benefits, and other perks, including retirement and deferred compensation.

Contracts — Once a mutually acceptable compensation package has been negotiated, the actual drawing up and signing of a contract sealing the deal.

If we could summarize the entire search process in one word, it would be *expectations*; the gap between assumptions and reality that may make or break a successful search conclusion. The sooner expectations are laid on the table, the sooner the gap may be either narrowed or the search terminated. We like to think of this process as analogous to the legal process of discovery. Both sides

are laying the groundwork for a winning case — interviewing potential witnesses, reviewing evidence, and preparing for trial. Likewise, in the “assessment” stage of the search, the Search Committee is interviewing references, listed and non-listed; visiting finalists’ campuses; and conducting preliminary conversations; while candidates are also doing their homework based on both formal and informal research.

As any competent trial attorney will verify, it is this preparation stage that is by far the most important to the outcome. If key facts are overlooked or discounted, the entire trial may be jeopardized. In a presidential search — with large stakes for both the institution and the candidate — similar “gaps,” assumptions or miscommunications, can result in wasted time and resources for both parties. To employ another legal term, *due diligence* at this “discovery” stage is imperative to a successful outcome.


Once both sides have completed this vital phase, the *compensation* issue becomes paramount.

To quote an apt phrase, here, “the devil is in the details.” If recruiters are involved, make sure that they are clear on details of the entire package before the search arrives at this stage. Too often, both candidates and hiring institutions consume time and energy on campus visits, interviews, reference-checks, and such, only to find that the two sides are too far apart on this critical issue. In the opening scenario, for example, the definition of “compensation” proved to be the stumbling block — the hiring committee had based its initial discussions narrowly on salary and benefits alone, while the candidate had defined it broadly to include a total compensation package.

Just as in a trial, miscommunications

between attorney and client, or between attorney and key witnesses, may lead to a loss or mistrial. In a search, it can lead to an aborted search. The key objective here is “no surprises.”

Finally, of course, the *contract* itself must be mutually agreed to and consummated. While some contractual provisions — i.e., salary, retirement, etc. — are obvious, others, such as service on outside boards or consulting arrangements, may not be. Even before the ink dries, however, unresolved contractual issues — the most common being renovations to and occupancy of the president’s house and selection of a car and furnishings — detract from the early agenda. In today’s demanding environment, in which new campus CEOs are expected to “hit the ground running,” these must not be allowed to detract from a successful presidential transition. They must be resolved before he or she assumes the presidency. If not, a “mistrial,” that is, a demoralizing, short-term presidency may occur.

With the average campus spending six figures on a national search, and the average length of presidential tenure dropping to five or six years, a simple cost/benefit analysis will affirm the importance of avoiding the three major derailers of successful searches: assessment, compensation, and contracts. Happy hunting! 

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