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Pandemic Transitions: The Impact of COVID-19 on Hiring and Onboarding in Academic Libraries

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Pandemic Transitions: The Impact of COVID-19 on Hiring and Onboarding in Academic Libraries

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Overview

In a mixed-methods survey utilizing a grounded theory approach, we explored the ways in which hiring and onboarding for professional academic library positions have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We sought to identify which changes made to hiring practices are here to stay and which traditional practices will endure. the full results of the study will be published in a forthcoming article.

Background

- COVID-19 completely disrupted the traditional interview methods utilized by academic libraries[1]
- Early stages of the pandemic saw large numbers of hiring freezes and budget uncertainty[2]
- In later stages, libraries blindly transitioned interviewing and onboarding to a virtual environment, with no standard for format, platform, or best practices[3,4]
- While an abundance of anecdotal evidence regarding hiring and onboarding practices during the pandemic was published, no in-depth study has investigated the changes and challenges faced by hiring managers. This study aims to fill that gap

Methodology

- The authors developed and piloted a 29-question survey consisting of quantitative and qualitative data items. This study was approved by the University of Connecticut IRB, Protocol #X21-0229
- Questions focused on hiring and onboarding practices taken by academic libraries between March 2020 to the present
- The survey was open to hiring managers, including human resources staff, library administrators, library supervisors, and search committee chairs
- The survey was sent to various national professional organization listservs including the American Library Association, Association of College and Research Libraries, Medical Library Association, and the Special Library Association on January 10, 2022 and was open for four weeks
- Data was collected and manipulated in Qualtrics then analyzed in Excel and NVivo

Participant Summary

CAMPUS LOCATION
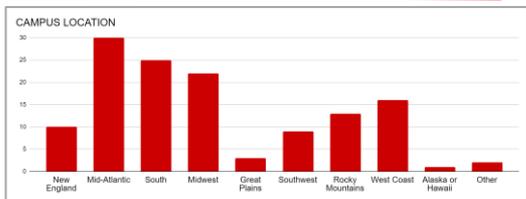
- 131 respondents completed the survey
- Majority of respondents worked at institutions with full-time equivalents numbering 500-4999 (31%) and 10,000-19,999 (21%)
- Respondents identified their primary roles as the following: human resources staff (n=4), library administrator (n=75), library supervisor (n=38), and search committee chair (n=10)
- 59% of respondents worked at public institutions while 41% worked at private institutions

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	RESPONSE	%
2-year college	7	5%
4-year college or university, non PhD-granting	27	21%
4-year college or university, PhD-granting	86	66%
Academic Health Sciences/Medical	7	5%
Other	4	3%

Qualitative Results

Analysis of qualitative data indicates the following pandemic hiring trends:
- Increased consideration of diversity, equity, and inclusion by search committees
- Large numbers of retirements and resignations and smaller applicant pools for vacant positions
- A need to improve the onboarding processes and assign mentors to new employees
- Evidence that virtual interviews are effective with some exceptions

Quantitative Results

- 53% (n=70) of respondents were forced to freeze job searches while 20% (n=26) canceled job searches during the pandemic
- Nearly all respondents indicated that their libraries held some 100% virtual interviews (n=130), while fewer respondents indicated that their library held some interviews with an in-person component (n=54) since March 2020
- Number of multi-day and full-day interviews decreased while number of half-day interviews increased compared to pre-pandemic schedules
- Zoom and email were the most common tools for communicating with candidates
- Virtual or hybrid onboarding of new employees led to the creation of additional onboarding/training materials (n=41)

FUTURE 100% VIRTUAL SEARCHES
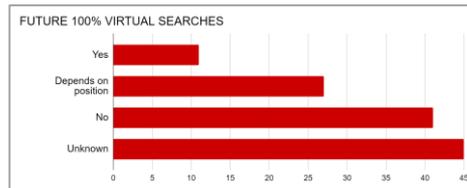
Conclusion

A large amount of uncertainty still surrounds hiring and onboarding employees since March 2020. As the pandemic has ebbed and flowed, so too have library decisions regarding virtual vs. in-person interviewing and employee work arrangements.

These experiences led to opportunities to reevaluate hiring and onboarding processes and in turn the adoption of more inclusive, equitable and accessible practices. The response to the pandemic and challenges in adapting required flexibility and creativity, but uncertainty and stress were consistent parts of the process.

A general consensus emerged that onboarding remotely or in a hybrid environment was difficult for all, and that libraries need to do a better job of welcoming pandemic-era employees and providing adequate training materials. The results of this study could be used to update previously published guidance on job searching for both hiring managers and academic library job candidates.

References and Additional Information: