

Staffing Your Research Laboratory

First Things First!

Before you can get your lab up and running, you need to consider your staffing needs. Remember that salaries take up a significant chunk of your budget, so decide carefully who you want to hire.

Employing undergraduates, while inexpensive, is a lot of work. They may require significant training and supervision and you may not have time initially. Likewise, graduate students need mentoring, so you may want to wait until your lab is up and running and you have more time to devote to them.

Most people start by hiring a lab technician. They may be more expensive, but he/she can train future employees.

The total number of people you hire depends on resources, funding and the amount of time you have to devote to training. Consider this carefully before deciding how many employees to take on.

Recruiting

While it may seem early to create a website for your lab, this is the perfect place to post job announcements. It will give potential applicants a feel for your work and can be an important recruiting tool.

Don't forget about your professional associations. You can list positions with them to attract applicants from all over. Word of mouth is perhaps the best recruiting tool. Tell colleagues what type of person you are looking for. Not everyone will know of someone who would be a good fit but if you can find someone who is recommended by someone you trust, you will be a step ahead.

Interviewing

Before you begin interviewing potential candidates, be sure to consult with your institution's HR staff to ensure you follow proper procedures and avoid legal pitfalls. Be sure you are clear about what you cannot legally ask an interviewee. Know whether the job falls within a labor union, as the candidate may ask. You should also know whether there is a probationary period that you should observe, and if annual performance evaluations are the norm.

Review the applicant's CV prior to the interview, making notes about skills and experience, education and gaps in employment, etc. that may need to be clarified in the interview. At the beginning of the interview summarize your research; describe the position, the lab, campus, etc. Consider giving a tour of the lab to candidates and point out what resources would be available.

Here are some sample questions (be sure to add your specific questions that relate to your lab/research):

Describe your previous lab experience.

Describe your experience with ___(relevant procedure)___.

Provide a problem that might be encountered and ask the candidate how he/she would go about solving it.

What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

How do you organize your time?

What are your strengths/weaknesses?

Tell me about the type of supervision you have received in the past.

Describe a time when you had to meet a strict deadline. How did you approach the project?

Do you work better in a team environment or individually?

Have you ever used (specific piece of equipment) before? What is your experience with it?

Tell me about a time when you had to deal with conflict in the work place? How did you handle the conflict?

Close the interview by allowing the candidate to ask questions. If the candidate has not already provided references, ask for them now. Ask about the candidate's availability (when can he/she start, does he/she have any vacations planned, etc.) Outline the hiring process and your timeline.

Resource:

HHMI Lab management:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2544488/Staffing-the-Lab-Perspectives-from-Both-Sides-of-the-Bench>