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Looking back: Effects of the pandemic on faculty hiring

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Abstract

This is a retrospective paper that considers the effects of the recent pandemic on faculty hiring. Were some of these effects temporary while others were more permanent? This paper discusses possible pros and cons of the pandemic's effects on faculty hiring from the university and faculty candidate's perspective. In uncertain economic times, we suggest that HR departments may be looking to streamline the hiring process via more virtual hiring practices. This paper suggests possible pros and cons to switch to more virtual processes in hiring.

Keywords: Virtual hiring, pandemic, HR

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many faculty hiring searches were cancelled or put on hold. Many universities instituted either year-long or even two-year-long bans on hiring. This pause in hiring led to a backlog of people searching for jobs. People who thought they'd get jobs in 2020 did not get them. Thus, there were even more candidates on the market for the following academic year (Olena, 2020) ^[3]. In addition, a survey by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, commissioned by Fidelity Investments, found that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 55% of U.S. university and college faculty have seriously considered either changing careers or retiring early. The study, entitled *On the Verge of Burnout* (Fidelity Investments, 2020) ^[1], was based on 1,122 online survey responses from faculty at two- and four-year colleges and universities across the USA between October 13-29, 2020. Of the respondents, 48% were tenured faculty, 11% were tenure-track, 16% were non-tenured, and 25% were part-time or adjunct faculty.

Organizations to which accounting faculty members belong, such as the American Accounting Association, transitioned to hosting virtual meetings instead of in-person conferences where presentations of research papers and other programs were presented virtually. During the virtual presentations attendees could send in their questions or comments for the presenters on the chat feature available on platforms such as Zoom and WebEx. The business world has already expanded use of virtual interviews in their recruiting process, including for campus recruitment for internships and jobs, as many college students could attest. While virtual operations lack the interpersonal connections of in-person classes, conferences, or programs it has become apparent that with the right technology functioning virtually can still be effective at a greatly reduced cost of money and time compared to in-person job searches.

Campus recruitment of faculty and administrators for open positions have long used phone calls with the candidate at one end of the call and a search committee on the other. What was lacking was the video of the participants, which provides a more informative form of communication as video does capture at least some facial expressions and body language than mere phone interviews. Virtual interviews were in use before the pandemic shutdown which started in March 2020. However, the use of virtual meetings including video greatly expanded. The interview process changed, going from in-person to video platforms like Zoom (Voza, 2020) ^[6]. Computers could enhance the quality of a virtual meeting with readily available cameras and microphones so that even individuals now have a high-quality virtual capability. Today, almost all individuals and universities have a virtual operating capability and can conduct more effective online interviews than just two years earlier.

Faculty recruitment was greatly reduced during the pandemic. With many schools holding off on hiring and imposing travel restrictions and precautions faculty recruitment was down over the last year and a half. However, colleges and universities try to resume to normal operations, even if post-pandemic normal is not the same as pre-pandemic. How will the emergence of virtual operations during the pandemic extend to faculty recruitment? What should schools consider in terms of cost-benefit to applying or expanding virtual recruitment of faculty? Recruitment of faculty will be more virtual, at least leading up to the point that finalist(s) are invited for a campus visit. While virtual interviews might not have played a major role in the past, it will likely in the future. A school could virtually interview numerous candidates for screening interviews and only invite finalists to campus to save on travel funds. The next section discusses the pros and cons of the pandemic's effects on the faculty candidate.

Faculty Candidate

Pros

Time savings and more flexibility

If a faculty candidate is interviewing with several schools, it would be less time-consuming to have virtual interviews with several schools than to physically travel to the several schools. Candidates who already hold faculty appointments and are exploring other career opportunities have classes to teach and other job responsibilities. Ph.D. candidates who are looking to be placed with schools after graduation may also have classes to teach and are usually working on their dissertations. If virtual interviews could be scheduled around classes or on non-teaching days, then it would not be necessary to fly to and from prospective employers' campuses. Travel to a campus interview can span two or three days and risk flight delays or cancellations. Candidates would avoid cancelling classes or having someone else cover their classes. Ph.D. students in particular, virtual interviews at numerous schools would be less disruptive to progressing on completion of a dissertation. It is not uncommon for Ph.D. students to have numerous interviews. Thus, virtual interviews can achieve a considerable time savings for faculty candidates.

Less wear and tear on health

With virtual interviews a candidate could avoid long flights to universities and often at inconvenient times (i.e. red-eye flights). Since travel had been severely curtailed during the pandemic, many airlines cut back flights and have often cancelled flights. The interview process can be stressful on the mental and physical health enough while travel concerns add an extra burden on the candidate. Also, ones' routine in teaching, research, and family might also be disrupted because of time-consuming travel for on-campus interviews.

Showcase ability to teach online

The pandemic forced many faculty to teach online classes who had never taught online before March 2020. Since online education will likely become more common even in large universities which were traditionally slow to embrace online delivery of teaching, the candidate can demonstrate that he/she can teach online, if asked to do so. Often during a 'Zoom' interview a candidate was asked to teach a short class via Zoom. This allowed the faculty candidate to demonstrate his/her ability to teach an online class along

with using tools to enhance the learning experience for the student.

Increase interview options

Since the on-campus interview requirement was waived during the pandemic, a candidate could theoretically consider more schools in the interview process. Lesser-funded schools that may be normally eliminated could be considered because of no time-commitment to fly to the school and spend two or three days there.

Limits awkward social dynamics

A virtual interview could cover up a 'multitude of sins.' If a candidate is a bit socially awkward and maybe even weak in his/her ability to interact and connect with students, a Zoom interview would limit the exposing of this weakness. With so much communication during the pandemic conducted via Zoom calls or social media, one did not have much social face to face interaction. Thus, a virtual interview could be more comfortable for a candidate whose strength is not face to face, in-person interactions.

Cons

Limits social personality

A virtual interview (i.e. Zoom) may not fully demonstrate one's personality and one's ability to talk and connect with students/faculty in person. In an in-person meeting, one can look a person in the eye, smile, and emit a positive energy to another person. Little things like manners, attitude, and emotional intelligence are difficult to demonstrate in a virtual call. In a two-day interview on campus, one can show respect and kindness in everyday situation such as communicating with administrative assistants, students, and dinner server. A candidate high in emotional intelligence can exhibit this strength in on campus meeting but would be rather limited in this regard in a virtual interview.

Nonverbal communication lost

Since most of the communication is non-verbal, a candidate really cannot fully gauge the faculty's interest in their research/teaching ability or their connection to him/her personally. Being unable to meet in-person reduces the candidate's ability to assess the likeability of the faculty and their willingness to work with together. In addition, it is difficult to feel the energy from faculty and students in a virtual call. Energy is something that is felt in person as all five senses are engaged.

In a virtual teaching session, it is difficult to see how students are understanding the material. In a normal (no mask requirement) teaching face to face session, one can assess students' nonverbal communication. Things like a smile or 'I get it' expression or puzzled looks are lost in a virtual teaching session for an interview. In a virtual teaching session, one cannot move around the room and see everyone along with the work a student has completed.

Nuisances of virtual interview

Lighting and camera angles in virtual calls may not be favorable to the candidate. One's appearance and mannerisms do affect other's perception of us. Technical difficulties can be a hazard to the interview (e.g. poor internet connection, little understanding of virtual technology). In addition, a question raised is how to dress for a virtual interview. Some would suggest full business

dress (i.e. men: suit and tie). Others would suggest business casual with clean business dress shirt. In an on-campus interview, this seems like less of an issue. Professional dress is expected.

Limits display of teaching ability

We suggest that it is difficult to replicate 100% the teaching experience online versus the in-class experience. Much of the rapport with students often is gained before class or during breaks. In a virtual teaching experience, the screen is blank before class and during breaks. In addition, being able to walk up to a student and take sincere interest in their work is limited in virtual interview teaching session. In addition, one's use of hands and movements in the classroom are nonexistent in an interview teaching session. In the classroom one can use multiple ways to teach material including having students work on problems on the board. Visual cues of the process of accounting can be lost in a virtual teaching session (i.e. illustrating the process of the job-order cost system from purchase of raw materials to cost of goods sold).

No preview of campus/town

A factor in the candidate's decision to accept an offer could be the campus and the town. If a candidate has never been to a town, one could argue that he/she is coming into the job blindly without any perceptual experience of the campus and the area. Seeing a classroom helps a candidate visualize teaching in that environment. Where can the candidate live? What activities can be enjoyed in the town? Again, all five senses are engaged in this process while feeling the energy of the campus and the town. The next section discusses the pros and cons of the pandemic's effects on the faculty candidate.

University

Pros

Reduces interview costs/more candidates

Bringing candidates to campus involves airfare, hotels, meals, and local transportation (e.g. Uber, rental car). Virtual interviews during the pandemic eliminated these costs as candidates were not permitted to be on campus. Without the constraint of costs, a university could expand the number of candidates to consider. A larger candidate pool may net higher quality candidate (s).

Involve more faculty in the interview process

The two-day on campus interview can be a time-intensive and inconvenient process for faculty. Virtual interviews allow more faculty to be on video calls for initial interviews and research/teaching sessions. The thirty-minute one-on-one interviews throughout an interview day could be reduced if many 'squares' of faculty are on a video call. More faculty can see the candidate answer questions. In addition, virtual interviews can be taped and reviewed later by faculty who could not attend the interview.

Assess online teaching ability

As already discussed, online teaching has increasingly been expected of faculty. The virtual interview with a teaching session gives some insight into the ability and interest of the candidate in teaching an online class.

Cons

No preview of campus/town

Part of the interview process is for the two parties, faculty candidate and the university, to market each other's strengths. Lucas and Welky (2021) ^[1] emphasized the importance of the campus visit:

Campus visits allow us to showcase our amazing students, wonderful colleagues, and beautiful campus situated in a town with reasonably priced homes, good public schools, and all the daily amenities you could want. Wary candidates — and that's most of them — often leave our campus feeling as excited about coming here as we are about hiring them. They leave knowing that we want more than a competent person to fill a classroom: We want a new member of our community. Hiring departments ask people to move themselves and perhaps a family to an alien location to work with people they barely know. We are asking them to surrender familiarity for the sake of a paycheck.

Lucas and Welky (2021) ^[1] argued that the on-campus interview could help offset advantages that more prestigious, wealthier universities in more desirable locations. Of course, the importance of quality-of-life issues may vary among candidates. Seeing the campus and the community could sway a candidate to accept an offer that otherwise would be a missing factor in a virtual interview process.

Nonverbal communication

A university makes a large investment in a candidate. The virtual interview makes it difficult to feel the energy and emotional intelligence of the person that comes with meeting them in person, face to face. One's assessment of the candidate's behavior in a social setting (e.g. dinner, hangout with faculty on campus) is also lost in the virtual interview. The university may get a false impression of the candidate's personality because a video Zoom call may stifle that impression. In addition, an in-person interview can allow for a fuller picture of who the candidate is.

Limits display of teaching ability

A university wants to hire a person who can teach well and connect with students. While a virtual interview could display the candidate's technical knowledge, the presentation skills and presence in a classroom is difficult to assess. How does the faculty candidate relate to questions by students? Does the candidate encourage inclusion in the classroom?

Nuisances of virtual interview

Technology issues and freezing of the screen along with inability to pull up files when needed are possible issues that could sabotage an interview. As stated earlier, lighting issues and angles could be unflattering to the candidate. It is also difficult to assess the warmth of a candidate and whether this person would be good to have on research projects.

Too many candidates

While being able to interview more candidates at low cost through the virtual process may sound appealing, there is the possibility of choice overload. A heavily researched

subject, choice overload is also known as “overchoice” or “the paradox of choice”. Paradox of choice refers to the difficulty of making a choice when presented with many options, especially when all options seem to have equal value (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd, 2010) ^[3]. Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (2004) ^[2], stated: “Learning to choose is hard. Learning to choose well is harder. And learning to choose well in a world of unlimited possibilities is harder still, perhaps too hard.” Perhaps more options are not always good: it can decrease our motivation to decide, decrease satisfaction with the final choice, and increase negative emotions like regret.

Summary

What are the temporary and permanent effects of the pandemic on faculty hiring? The hiring of a faculty member is a potentially large investment in salary, fringe benefits, research stipends and overhead. The cost and time benefits of virtual interviews might not be worth the risk of a wrong hire that could occur by not at least interviewing the finalist candidate in person. Perhaps the initial interviews of candidates could be done virtually, but at least the top candidate should be interviewed in a traditional in-person campus visit. While virtual interviews were necessary to comply with COVID-19 shutdowns of campuses, we suggest that finalist interviews will likely mostly be in-person, on-campus meetings. Virtual interviews for the initial short list of candidates will likely permanently replace audio phone call interviews.

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