



# The Smart Guide to Recruitment and Selection

By Tyson Wood

The school recruitment landscape has changed over the course of the last 10 years. Where the majority of teacher supply pools were once consistently deep and a quality shortlist could be sourced with a single advert, factors such as location, subject specialisation or school ethos criteria make teacher recruitment today far more challenging. A teacher shortage is felt in many parts of Australia, while education accountability has increased nationally. National standards for quality teaching are more clearly defined. Compliance has increased. Schools are working harder than ever before to fill a teaching vacancy.

Thanks to my 14 years of Australian school recruitment experience and with the help of Principals, Education Authorities, HR Managers and Smart Teachers staff, this article shares advice that we hope will assist you in creating stand out recruitment campaigns that will attract more candidates and enable you to select a teacher who will bring great benefit to your school.

## Preparation

Speak to an experienced Principal and they will tell you that an unfilled vacancy is better than a bad hire. To ensure you get off to the right start avoid rushing to advertise. Begin sourcing candidates well ahead of a vacancy and proactively build a robust recruitment platform. To do so, engage, assess, track and monitor expressions of interest, supply teachers, contract teachers and practicum teachers. Ranking candidates will enable you to have a detailed succession

plan in place across many of the positions in your school. Once a vacancy emerges, you can manage your own candidate pools and strategically alert candidates to vacancies. Doing so will minimise your dependency on reactive advertising whilst enhancing your safeguarding capability as many of your candidates will have a history with you. Likewise, create a school LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter account and encourage staff to follow.

A stable recruitment platform should include an up-to-date recruitment policy. Such policies should clearly define procedures related to recruitment and selection to guide staff responsible. To create or update your recruitment policy we recommend speaking to your local authority for assistance. Smart Teachers can also share our own policy to help.

## Definition

Once a vacancy emerges, start the recruitment campaign with a detailed plan. Ensure that advertisements, position descriptions and person specifications are clearly defined and cohesive. Consider your school and departmental needs, aids and barriers. Create recruitment resources that are up-to-date and reflect school diversity. As advertisements and candidate information packs are meant to attract and engage, articulate the school's strengths. At the same time be realistic. Don't hide the challenges as they may be the very aspects of the job that draw in the right candidate.

Intelligent advertisements should be clear, concise and interesting. For Paul Teys, Principal of Hunter Valley Grammar, his advertisements share “something really simple to appeal to an applicant and then direct them to our web-site.” Communicate only the most vital messages, the key characteristics of the school, essential criteria, how to obtain more information and how to apply. Long-time Smart Teachers consultant and Queensland Team Leader Chris Wilson states, “there is a fine line between attractive and unattractive advertising. Advertisements can do well to grab the attention of a candidate who is contemplating a change but if the application criteria is too lengthy, candidates may see the process as too hard and daunting. Catching the interest of experienced teachers usually requires you to be creative, think like an applicant and be strategic to the regions you place the advert.”

Job descriptions and person specifications will be the basis for the information package you will share with candidates. Job descriptions should cover basic information about the role and a one sentence summary of why the job exists. Describe the significant areas the job has an impact on and examine the principal accountabilities or outputs of the job. We also recommend including performance standards or organisational charts.

Person specifications should detail the knowledge, skills, experience, abilities, conduct and personal qualities sought in the ideal candidate. A person specification can describe the essential, desirable and threshold attributes required but limit these to a manageable number; that will really make a difference. Consider not just skills and knowledge but behaviours, values, characteristics and motivation. A selection criterion can be based on the attributes in your person specification. So too can assessment rubrics.

Spending the time to equip your recruitment campaign with the right advertisements will go a long way to safeguard your school against prolonged advertising, sourcing unsuitable candidates or hiring the wrong person.

## Attraction - Maximise Your Advertising Reach

With an intelligent advertisement and a more detailed understanding of who you are seeking, you are ready to begin attracting your next teacher. Spend time to select where to post your advertisement to maximise the response. What worked well in the past or for another school may not work for you. Advertising after all, even in the digital age, can be hit-and-miss. Avoid advertising in one place and avoid hiring the candidate who simply stands out from others who applied, unless of course, the candidate perfectly matches the needs of the school and role.

Digital advertising is a cost effective and efficient means of advertising. When evaluating digital employment advertising platforms, especially those that serve many industries, visit

the site and search teaching jobs in your area. This will enable you to see how many other schools are advertising and where they are. If there is a good concentration of schools using the site and the jobs are current, there is a good chance the site has an active, job seeking teacher audience that may be drawn to your job.

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Take time to investigate the advertising level of candidate engagement. Websites now exist in Australia that exclusively serve education and draw in not only active job seekers but passive education audiences. Tes.com for example is the world's largest digital education site boasting over 8 million teachers and leaders from England, Australia, New Zealand and the over 900 international schools throughout the world. Their resource platform, hosts a community of teachers and schools sharing lesson plans and other education resources. Tes reached its 1 billionth download in May 2017. With a dedicated job board and intelligent advertising tools, schools can connect not only with active job seekers but a large audience of teachers visiting Tes.com to download resources.

Choosing where to advertise will also depend on the location of your school, the subject specialisation you require and the time of year. All these factors may require you to expand your reach nationally and internationally. Incorporating websites that offer this reach will go a long way to increasing the quantity of candidates



## Attraction - Candidate Engagement is Essential

There is more to candidate attraction than the quality of your advertisement and where you post it. In times of candidate under-supply, it is important to go the extra mile to provide a level of candidate engagement well before the interview stage.

Be sure to communicate timelines and do your best to adhere to them. The wider the gap between the start of advertising and the interviewing stage, the higher the likelihood candidates will become unavailable or lose interest. No news is easily misinterpreted as bad news. Don't jump to re-advertising too early into your first advertising cycle; though we experience the highest volume of applicants in the first three days, many schools have told me they experience a spike in quality in the final three days to the deadline. This is especially true of leadership positions. If you have used many sources or websites to attract candidates, you will be able to avoid re-advertising. Prolonged advertising is viewed upon negatively by prospective applicants and will expand the waiting period for candidates who have applied.

Ensure you select skilled staff to support the selection panel by providing an appropriate level of communication to candidates. As Wilson notes, "consistent communication between two parties from first contact with a teacher to commencement of employment is vital." Be sure front line staff are informed of the position and are knowledgeable about your school. Phone call or email enquiries should be welcomed and responded to quickly. Confirmation of application emails and feedback – especially when you have set a lengthy attraction period – should be provided. Applications should be tracked and monitored. These activities, coupled with a robust candidate engagement pack, will set you apart from the competition.

## Selection

Concurrent with the attraction stage or just after the advertisement deadline, you will begin the selection process. It is here that an emphasis on quantity (the number of candidates who applied) shifts to quality. If you have defined selection criteria earlier in the process, we recommend using this to create an assessment rubric or benchmarking framework. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers can help structure your rubric. There is also benefit in specifying the knowledge, skills, attributes and values that are required to meet the essential needs of your school. This can be time consuming but an excellent activity for senior leaders and middle leaders as it will create a customised approach and enhance the understanding, expectation and integrity of your selection panels. Smart Teachers' Expert Teacher Appraisal was created this way. Since its introduction, our ability to consistently measure and communicate quality became possible.

Keep a record of all decisions made by panel members who review applications. In addition to understanding specific criteria for short listing, panel members should be trained in general candidate assessment practice. This starts at the application review stage as there is much you can learn about a candidate from simply perusing their CV. Tread with caution when considering candidates who have prolonged, unexplained gaps in their teaching experience. Candidates who move frequently from school to school should also be more carefully considered. In these cases, do not progress without asking probing questions to rule out any concerns.

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If the candidate is at another school, find out what's going on in their current school and how well it is doing. However, be careful to use public data and carefully consider context. Though education circles can be small and teachers in one school will know teachers in others, avoid word-of-mouth as widening the decision making to staff outside the selection panel can complicate the process.

## Selection - Interview Techniques and Tips

The interview is the most important activity in the selection process and needs to be carefully delivered. Interview panellists need to be skilled in interview questioning techniques and evaluating candidates on their responses. Be sure to avoid a single interviewer approach, favouring a two to four person panel consisting of senior leadership team members and a relevant head of faculty.

The interview needs to engage as well as assess, so be sure to welcome candidates and present questions in a warm and positive way. The chair of the interview should state the purpose of the interview, give positive feedback as to why the candidate was selected for interview and should initiate opening and closing questions to set candidates at ease. For Kirsten Ferguson, Human Resources Manager at Brisbane Boys' College, "selection processes are a two-way street; the employer is interviewing the candidates, but the candidates are also interviewing the employer. A candidate who feels valued, comfortable and welcome will want to join your team."

Have a questioning plan and decide who will ask core and probing questions. Ensure that all questions and exercises

are related to one or more pre-agreed selection criteria. Consider what sort of responses you hope to get to different questions and what constitutes a good answer. Start with open questions that drive candidates to contextualise. Forcing candidates to present their skills, knowledge and philosophies in real contexts will give you a more realistic insight into their understanding of how to do the job in such a way that will bring benefit to you.

Don't try to intimidate candidates – it is not predictive of their behaviour once in a role. Remain polite and engaged, but don't be afraid to push for the level of response you require, or to probe further to get the evidence you need. Drill down on the positives and the potential negatives to test that the skills, knowledge and abilities of the candidate will meet the needs of your school.

Be sure that questions also relate not only to performance but conduct. Interviewers should look out for answers that show no or little understanding or appreciation of children and their needs. This includes inappropriate language about children, unclear boundaries with children and answers that imply adults and children are equal.

Avoid leading, multiple questions and hypotheticals. Don't ask personal questions that aren't related to the job. Structure questions in a logical sequence so that candidates do not leap from one topic to another. Aim to speak for only 20 percent of the time and allow candidates to speak for the remaining 80 percent. Show that you are interested in the answer by making eye contact.

## Pre-Employment Risks for Employers

It is important to consult with an experienced recruiter, Principal or your local authority to build your risk aversion capacity in the recruitment process. For Ashley Uren, Assistant Director (Employee Relations) at Independent Schools Queensland, "it is important to note that risks of adverse action claims and discrimination claims arise in the pre-employment period, so employers need to exercise caution when interviewing applicants. For example, an employer cannot refuse to employ someone due to an impairment, unless it relates to the inherent requirements of the role, and the employer is unable to make reasonable adjustments to allow the candidate to do the job with that impairment. Likewise, under the Fair Work Act, you could not decide to refuse someone employment on the basis that they had previously exercised a workplace right, such as making a WorkCover claim. An employee who thinks they have been treated unfairly because of an impairment could make a discrimination claim, either in the Fair Work Commission (under the general protections regime) or in the Anti-Discrimination tribunal." A recruitment campaign that is clearly defined, considers performance and conduct requirements, connects assessment to the cultural, professional and physical needs of the school is essential. Such campaigns



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will improve selection capacity whilst ensuring a fair, equitable and more accurate evaluation and decision making process.

Worker's compensation and workplace health and safety risk must also be considered in the pre-employment process. Uren states, "it is also relevant in the pre-employment period to consider the positive obligation under work health and safety legislation and under the common law to ensure that the health and safety of workers and other persons affected by work is not put at an unreasonable level of risk due to an attribute of a prospective employee. If an employer fails to adequately manage someone's health and safety at work, it may be in breach of the work health and safety legislation, which carries significant penalties for non-compliance."

## Selection - Referees and Referencing

Reference checking should be completed by a designated panel member who is experienced, has played a role in the design of selection criteria and overall recruitment. Moreover, this person should demonstrate an understanding of your overall recruitment policy and be trained in child protection and reportable conduct.

Referee details are first relevant at the application perusal stage of the selection process. If a candidate does not list current principals or deputy principals but favours colleagues or only middle managers, this can be a warning

sign. Likewise, if a candidate has worked in more than one school in the last 5 years and provides an adequate referee to cover some but not all experiences, this too can be a warning sign. Though three referees are the most popular quantity, conducting checks on all experiences within a five year period is recommended and don't be afraid to go back further.

The timing of reference checking must also be carefully considered. It is common today for schools to complete formal or informal checks ahead of interview. This can help inform the interview, however, can jeopardise the relationship between potential employee and employer. For example, it is common for candidates to apply for a new job without disclosing this to their current employment. If you take it upon yourself to contact a prospective employee's school without confirming with the candidate, this can break down potential appointments and cause friction with other schools.

Be sure to make your policy on referencing clear and make it known that referees listed on an application will be contacted. Experienced candidates will normally consent to reference checks when there is greater success certainty. Candidates will choose not to apply rather than risk having their school know they are looking elsewhere if they believe they do not have a chance at the job. Reference checking after interview or just prior to a second interview is recommended.

## **Selection – Teaching a Lesson**

The practice of having a teaching candidate not only interview for a role but teach a portion of a lesson at your school is becoming more popular. Be sure to inform candidates as early as possible and provide as much scaffolding as possible. Explain your reasons for having the candidate teach a lesson and share lesson plans and class descriptions. Nominate one person to assess the lesson, ideally a Head of Department, and make this known to the candidate. This will go a long way towards putting the candidate at ease and enabling him or her to prepare.

## **Appointment**

It is important to have a clear and detailed appointment strategy as it is in this stage that you will formally secure your new employee and set the tone for a successful induction. Delay discussions about individual candidates until all selection activities are completed so the panel can consider all information. Decisions should be based on all aforementioned selection activities and subject to qualifications, licensing authority, criminal history and personal identification checks. The Chair of the panel should lead the process of examining the evidence on each candidate.

Be realistic about what to expect from an applicant but do

not appoint if you have not seen the right person. Inform the successful candidate first - they may say no, which may influence the outcome of offering the next in line. If the second candidate meets the criteria but has previously been declined they may choose not to accept knowing they are not your first selection.

Although verbal acceptances are binding, it is important to quickly draw up contracts and present employment paperwork. Prolonged gaps can lead to breakdowns especially when remuneration, timetabling or other information has not been shared up to this point. Moreover, as many candidates will not formally resign from their current post before receiving a contract, waiting to send contracts will prolong termination notice requirements and jeopardise a candidate commencing on or nearer the desired start date.

Feedback should be given verbally and on the basis of evidence of performance against the selection criteria, job description and person specification. Share with the successful candidate why they stood out during the recruitment process and secured the position. As Ferguson states, "few employers take the time to give feedback to successful candidates, yet this can be such a powerful tool for getting the best out of new appointees from their first day on the job."

Unsuccessful candidates should be treated with respect. You may wish to offer feedback, notably to those who interviewed, but be aware that anything you say could be used in an appeal. Maintain absolute confidentiality at all times.

Finally, agree with the successful applicant when you will inform all staff and parents of the decisions. Establish a regular communication line with the successful candidate to effectively manage the gaps between appointment and commencement. Ferguson notes, "the time between finalising an appointment and the commencement of the successful candidate in their new role offers an excellent opportunity to engage the appointee with their new role and employer, making them feel valued and part of the team before they arrive for their first day on the job. Particularly in cases where an appointment is made months in advance, it is useful for the line manager or HR Manager to be in regular contact with the appointee, offering access to curriculum resources, policies and procedures, training materials, etc. Inviting the appointee to visit pre-commencement for a 'meet and greet' with colleagues can be an excellent opportunity to build relationships, ask questions, acclimate to the workplace culture, and can also help to ease first-day jitters and make the on-the-job induction process smoother." Heightening the level of engagement will minimise a breakdown during this critical phase and enable your new teacher to hit the ground running.

## Induction - Help Your New Teacher Hit the Ground Running

Successful recruitment processes do not end once an appointment is confirmed. A well-planned induction is critical for a successful recruitment process and to enable the staff member to get up to speed as quickly as possible. Make as much use as possible of data generated by the interview and selection process to begin performance management and professional development. Where possible, arrange for a mentor from among the experienced middle or senior leaders.

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## Dedicated Recruitment, Maximum Results

Effective school recruitment is a multi-layered process involving greater preparation, definition, attraction, selection, appointment and induction. After-all, success is defined by the quality of the teacher employed and the benefit that person has to all students, school and community. To this end, Smart Teachers' dedicated service and

expertise have made a contribution to Australian schools and will continue to do so. Many schools have successfully met the challenges of recruitment today. With a fixed and detailed approach, all Australian schools can create more rigorous and engaging recruitment campaigns and maximise the quality of teaching and learning.

**Tyson Wood** is a founder of Smart Education Australia and has helped Australian schools in the recruitment of teachers and middle managers since 2003. He established Smart Leaders in 2014 and has since worked with many Principals and School Councils to recruit executive leaders. Tyson continues to assist in the strategic development of Smart Teachers and its staff members.

