Defining and Using "Fit" Appropriately in Searches

Overview:

Assessments of "fit" are predominantly informed by bias. Therefore, it's essential that any use of the word "fit":

- **Is based on detailed discussion by the committee**

- **Involves definitions and examples of good fit and bad fit**

- **Relates directly to criteria or unit standards**

- **Is based on definitions created before a committee reviews or assesses applicants; otherwise, their definitions can shift based on biases**

Otherwise, the word "fit" can be twisted to introduce discrimination and bias in a search.

Using the Term "Fit"

The term "fit" is used frequently in searches. Committees talk about whether someone is a "good fit" or a "bad fit."

The term "fit" can be used in many ways; four key ways are described below. Two of these ways can support building a strong, welcoming unit. The other two ways can discriminate and introduce bias into a search.

Using "good fit" in a good way

The term "good fit" can be used to support building a strong, welcoming unit. For example, someone who:

- Has skills that match the core requirements of the job

- Demonstrates interpersonal abilities like working well with others, collaborating, and respectful ways of interacting that support the mission and priorities of the unit

- Offers areas of expertise that blend well with the rest of the team, such as engaging in complementary work or research, an interest in collaboration, or teaching areas that fill gaps

Using "good fit" in a bad way

The term "good fit" can also be used to discriminate and introduce bias into the process. For example, someone who:

- Went to the same institutions as members of the search committee (not relevant to their abilities or potential contributions)

- Comes from similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds or other characteristics such as gender and skin tone as the majority of the department (promotes homogeneity and unfairly advantages certain individuals)

Using "bad fit" in a good way

The term "bad fit" can be used to support building a strong, welcoming unit. For example, someone who:

- Does not have the knowledge, skills or experience described in the criteria

- Has areas of expertise, lines of work, or priorities that will divert resources from the mission and priorities of the unit

- Lacks any experience or demonstrated interest in supporting students who are members of underrepresented groups

- Has a history of disrespectful or problematic ways of interacting, such as bullying, ignoring certain colleagues, personal or sexual harassment, racist speech, etc.

Using "bad fit" in a bad way

The term "bad fit" can also be used to discriminate and introduce bias into the process. For example, someone who:

- Is dissimilar from the dominant cultures, genders, or other interpersonal characteristics in the unit (this is the most common way that discrimination occurs in searches and results in unfair loss of opportunities for qualified candidates)

- Has a different personality (e.g. introvert / extrovert) or working style (e.g. direct communicator / indirect communicator) from the majority of the unit (A majority of claims of "bad fit" based on these elements arise from either biases or fear of change rather than openness to evolution of a unit)

Each of these examples could (and should) be unpacked further by the committee as the details of how they apply within your unit will only become clear with that discussion.

Some aspects of fit are essential for success. Some are discriminatory.

Humans tend to be comfortable with the way things are. This built-in bias against diversity and change means that we should always consider if we are biased when we feel that someone doesn't "fit" or when we automatically assume that they do.

"Fit" does matter. Certain people can better support the work of a unit, and others have ways of being that may be harmful to the unit or individual members. To differentiate between the two, use these steps:

Steps to using "fit" well

1. Consider what aspects of "good fit" are essential for success, and what parts are biased.

2. Identify what kinds of "bad fit" may usefully turn away applicants who won't help your unit grow, versus those definitions that are discriminatory.

3. Play around with each description to see if they have any hidden biases or limits.

4. Construct an inclusive definition of "good fit" that is as broad and welcoming as possible. Include diverse cultures, personalities and communication styles, and skills in working together.

5. Embed this definition in your criteria and job ad.

6. Continue to grow and expand your unit culture, always working to evolve and change, so that a wide diversity of candidates are a "good fit."