

## Can top talent still be found in the COVID-19 world?

Attracting and hiring top talent is an important priority for organizations big and small, but when COVID-19 adjusted how we work and live, many of those organizations had concerns that their hiring needs would not be met. Whether a major higher education organization, a foundation or charity, or an investment firm, search committees and hiring managers across industries are wondering how to identify talent, conduct interviews, and ensure their organization is getting a cultural fit for their team -- all while in a virtual setting.

**Criterion Search Group** is a leader in the executive search industry, with a specialized focus on helping foundations and nonprofit organizations find dynamic leaders. Criterion's founder and President Beth Hare answers some common questions about virtual executive searches.

### How can I ensure I'm finding top talent in this virtual setting?

The most important thing about finding top talent is to find the people who are the perfect fit for your organization *who are not thinking about making a job change*. The tools we use to find those people are essentially the same in the pre- and post- COVID-19 world. We reach out to influencers and thought leaders for referrals, target extraordinary individuals at similar organizations or in similar positions, and we network to hear about people's experiences in a particular industry or field.

COVID-19 has prevented us from meeting most candidates in person, so we conduct these types of conversations over the phone or on a video conferencing service, such as Zoom. Whether in person or in a virtual setting, the outcome is the same: a small, select group of talented individuals who are a good fit for an organization's culture and for the position.

### How is a virtual search different from a traditional search?

The biggest difference is that search committees and hiring managers cannot meet with and interview candidates in person and instead must rely on video conferences. The goal of an executive search is to ensure that the candidate fits the needs, qualifications, and culture of the organization. In a virtual setting, the most difficult part of this assessment to make is cultural fit. Certainly, a video interview can still provide some sense of whether the candidate is the right fit for the organization to some extent, but nothing takes the place of an in-person meeting.

Because of this challenge, we spend more time than normal interacting directly with candidates. We also

carefully check references and want to speak with people who have worked with and for the candidate, as well as the people they have worked for. The information we glean from these candid conversations goes a long way towards assessing cultural fit when combined with the video interview impressions.

### Can you discuss a recent successful virtual search that Criterion conducted?

Recently we had the opportunity to work with Philabundance, the region's largest hunger relief organization. Philabundance was hiring an Executive Director/CEO, and we worked closely with their search committee to ensure their next leader was mission-driven, focused on the big picture, and provided strong, positive leadership.

Loree D. Jones was named the new CEO of the organization in May after a lengthy search. The majority of our contact with Philabundance and Loree happened as the world was grappling with the impacts of COVID-19 and the new changes to how we work and live. We worked quickly to ensure that the Philabundance search committee, the Board of Directors, and Loree could continue their conversation about the position and the organization's needs.

### How did the candidate and Search Committee Chair feel about the virtual search experience?

I received great feedback from the Philabundance candidate and the Search Committee Chair regarding the virtual search experience. Both found there to be benefits, but still see the in-person element to search as vital aspects of search.

John Hollway, Board Chair of Philabundance and Chair of the Search Committee shared with me that he found the technology provided a work-around to the traditional interview logistics.

"We used Zoom, and it improved search committee meetings where we already had the comfort level with each other. It also accelerated scheduling," said Hollway. "It sometimes challenged our interviews with candidates, some of whom were more comfortable with the medium than others.

"I do not think that virtual is the future of search, however. I think there is no substitute for meeting people in person, and that will continue to be the case once we can do so safely," he continued.

Loree D. Jones, the candidate selected through the virtual process, mentioned that everyone's shift to telecommuting allowed for a certain comfort level with various video platforms.

"As a result of the increase in telecommuting required by the quarantine, many people shifted to videoconference platforms over a short period of time," said Jones, who started her tenure as CEO on

June 2. “While people would prefer to meet in person, I think that move to telecommuting gave us more comfort with and prepared us to communicate more confidently via virtual platforms.”

### **How has technology impacted executive search during COVID-19?**

Criterion has conducted several executive searches this spring, most of them entirely virtual. While not ideal, using technology like Zoom can provide many benefits to the process.

Perhaps most prominently, candidates and search committees have newfound flexibility. Candidates who are across the country from the search committee can still take part in the process without having to leave home. Many candidates are also able to attend interviews without having to take time off of work. Search committees have found it easier to schedule meeting times, as people are able to join virtual meetings in succession without having to travel or commute to a mutual location.

### **Do you think a virtual approach to executive search is here to stay? What is the future of the industry?**

I believe some of the virtual aspects will become the norm for executive search. Every client organization we work with has the ability to dictate how they want the process to go, and some may want to capitalize on a virtual search's benefits, such as increased flexibility and accessibility.

Search has always been a very hands-on industry, and that person-to-person element has been missing due to COVID-19. I think that we'll retain some of the virtual search benefits, while keeping the in-person elements that really help an organization understand how a candidate would fit in a role. I do not think technology will ever leave the search process, and it will likely continue to play a large role in our industry, but I am convinced the human side of the search and recruiting will not be replaced anytime soon, as there is just no substitute for it.

### **Can you share any words of advice about working through a virtual search?**

When conducting a virtual search, it is especially important that the search committee is in agreement on the critical qualifications for the role and the focus of the position. Any lack of clarity is magnified when committee members are not able to spend time together as they normally would.

Candidates would be well served to be very comfortable and practiced with the video conferencing technology they will use for interviews. Simple things, such as being properly framed in the screen and properly lit, can make a big difference in

search committee decisions.

### **Any final thoughts?**

Search is always evolving, and the COVID-19 crisis has allowed the industry to evolve once again.

We saw it when the internet began to truly take hold – people were convinced that the search industry would suffer because candidates could be found online, but in reality, the search industry grew. It happened again with the popularization of LinkedIn. The death of the search industry was predicted because organizations could post jobs to LinkedIn and have candidates come to them directly. Again, the search industry evolved and grew even bigger. I see the COVID-19 crisis as another opportunity for the search industry to evolve, to adapt, and to grow.