

Essential information for filling consultant posts

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There appear to be more posts being advertised for consultants in psychiatry than available suitably qualified applicants. The process of advertising, contacting interested candidates and compiling an information pack is reviewed in an attempt to formulate an 'ideal approach'.

There is a national shortage of suitably qualified applicants for consultant posts in psychiatry. Consultant expansion to meet increased service commitments and increasing public expectations has added to the problem. Targeting the small pool of suitably qualified applicants has, therefore, become an energetic exercise.

Two trends noted were the reappearance of advertisements and the appointment of existing consultants to other posts. This study examines the contents of information packs made available for consultant posts in psychiatry and reviews the process of attracting potential candidates.

The study

We examined advertisements for permanent consultant posts in psychiatry in the *British Medical Journal* for three months between November 1994 and January 1995. We contacted the Personnel Department mentioned in each advertisement and requested application forms and information packs as potential applicants.

The following points were noted for each post:

- type of post
- period between appearance of advertisement and closing date
- mention of equal opportunities and no smoking policy in advertisement
- time taken to receive information pack
- presence of covering letter
- appearance of information pack
- content of pack
- follow-up letter
- repeat advertisement.

Findings

We replied to a total of 33 posts during the survey period. Table 1 shows the breakdown of adver-

tisement by speciality. Table 2 shows the number of days between the appearance of the advertisement and the closing date for applications. Surprisingly, two advertisements did not mention a closing date.

Eighty-five per cent of advertisements mentioned visiting arrangements; 24.2% of advertisements mentioned equal opportunity policy and no smoking policy; 30.3% mentioned equal opportunities alone.

The information pack was requested within five working days of the appearance of the advertisement in the *British Medical Journal*. Table 3 records the time taken to receive the information pack. Fifty-five per cent of the packs were received without a covering letter. Of those that did arrive with a covering letter, 54.6% were personalised letters with the rest being impersonal or badly photocopied. Only 24.2% of the information

Table 1. Posts by speciality

Speciality	Number of posts
General psychiatry	14
Forensic	2
Old age psychiatry	6
Neuropsychiatry	1
Psychotherapy	3
Rehabilitation	1
Child/adolescent psychiatry	5
Substance abuse	1

Table 2. Time available to respond to advertisement

No. of days between advertisement appearing and closing date	No. of posts with this time duration	% of posts with this time duration
0-7	1	3.0
8-14	8	24.2
15-21	9	27.3
22-28	10	30.3
29-35	2	6.1
35+	1	3.0
No closing date mentioned	2	6.1

Table 3. Delay before receiving information pack

Days after request	% received
Within 3 days	42.4
Within 6 days	24.2
Within 9 days	12.1
More than 9 days	21.3

packs were of a high, professional quality. Table 4 shows the contents of the information pack.

A follow-up notification letter a few days prior to the closing date was received in only 5% of the sample. One-quarter of the advertisements were repeated within two weeks of the closing date.

Comment

The study, although small, was a revealing eye-opener. The quality and range of information within the information packs produced by potential employers was variable, incomplete in important detail and often uninteresting.

The optimal scenario would be to place an advertisement in the appropriate journal with ample time before a clear closing date, encouraging pre-application visits and information on specific policies such as equal opportunity. The information pack should be well presented, promptly dispatched, preferably with a personal covering letter and contain clear information, for example on proposed duties. Additional information on schools, residential areas, places of local interest and beauty, tourist information guides, maps, etc., could go a long way to encourage applicants to these posts which are, after all, senior posts carrying a level of responsibility at the top remunerative end of clinical work. A follow-up letter would also be helpful.

In this highly competitive environment, potential employers need to make greater efforts to make their posts more attractive.

Table 4. Contents of information pack

Contents	%
Information about hospital	72.7
Information about Trust (with business plan)	75.8
Future plans of Trust	15.0
Person specification	10.0
Names of staff contactable for further information	2.5
Criteria for short list	2.5
Staffing levels	91.0
Provisional job plan	81.9
Duties	75.8
Management structure	48.5
Teaching/training	54.5
Expenses	20.0

Conclusion

Within the limitations of this study, such as numbers and confirmation that posts had actually been filled, it seems clear that more attention should be paid when advertisements are placed for consultant posts in psychiatry. The whole process needs to be reviewed if applicants are to be encouraged to apply, let alone take up post and remain in their post until retirement. Further work is needed to see if the shortfalls identified here exist in other disciplines and at different grades.

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