

The Best and Brightest Available

Hiring the right superintendent to fill an open position takes time and effort.

BY PAUL VERMEULEN

One should never take the duties and responsibilities of a golf course superintendent lightly. To put things in perspective, putting green maintenance is the most sophisticated form of agriculture and requires equal parts of art and science to produce the high quality playing surface so often demanded by today's golfers. Thus, when a superintendent vacancy arises due to retirement or other circumstance, a selection committee should focus on hiring the best and brightest available.

Make no mistake. Finding good candidates with the kind of well-rounded credentials needed to be a golf course superintendent is a true challenge. To be successful, the right candidates must

possess an in-depth knowledge of agronomy and the game of golf, have expert managerial and communication skills, and be keenly aware of environmental issues that challenge our modern society.

To date, the subject of hiring a golf course superintendent has received little attention in the glossy pages of most professional magazines. The reason could be that writing about job turnover is a delicate topic that makes authors uncomfortable, or simply that superintendents are largely taken for granted and most course officials assume that eager candidates will be just outside the door waiting to step in. Whether apprehension or apathy, the truth is that nothing gets done on a



Candidates for a superintendent position must have proficient administrative abilities in addition to a wide range of skills to keep the maintenance department running smoothly and within budget.

golf course without people, and nothing gets done well without capable leadership from the superintendent.

Hiring a new golf course superintendent essentially involves attracting, identifying, and evaluating qualified candidates. The problems faced by ad hoc selection committees, however, are that they have (1) little technical knowledge regarding course management, (2) limited experience administrating a rigorous hiring procedure, and (3) limited free time to spend sitting in long meetings deciding whom to hire. It should not be surprising, then, that many course officials find sidestepping the process too tempting to ignore.

Probably the most common maneuver around a comprehensive process for hiring a new superintendent is to call well-known individuals in the turfgrass industry for a so-called "short list" of top candidates. Realistically, however, no one individual can know all of the best candidates, nor can anyone know who may step forward if the opening is widely publicized. Thus, avoiding the responsibility of conducting an all-inclusive search limits access to a larger pool of candidates, which subsequently can fail to bring forward many good candidates for an open position. Furthermore, discussions about unofficial candidates from a short list can spark false rumors of a superintendent's job dissatisfaction and unnecessarily endanger his/her current position.

Superintendent candidates with extensive construction experience may merit special consideration in the interview process when the golf course requires major improvements in the foreseeable future.



Executive search firms can provide administrative assistance with part of the hiring process, such as writing a job description/posting, preliminary candidate screening, candidate recruiting, and conducting background checks. Keep in mind, however, that the role of such firms should be to aid the open hiring process for the convenience of a selection committee and not to act as an exclusive porthole through which a short list of candidates can be obtained. A directory of search firms that have established a credible track record is available from the GCSAA.

Given the pitfalls of seeking an easy resolution for employers and potential candidates alike, the best course of action for selection committees is to use a hiring strategy that can maximize the likelihood of success, keep people out of harm's way, and convey the importance of the superintendent's role in the game of golf. The approach presented in this article is one that has worked well for selection committees in the Mid-Continent Region. It's not intended to suggest that it is an industry standard, because there is none. Rather, it's an example of an objective process that can be used by selection committees to identify good candidates. And, while this article is directed at selection committees, it can also be used as a guide for developing a succession plan by forward-thinking superintendents.

GETTING STARTED

Every successful formula for hiring a professional staff member begins with an understanding of how that person contributes to the overall operations of a facility. Few selection committee members have a clear understanding of a superintendent's entire range of responsibilities, so the best place to start the hiring process is to develop a detailed job description for the position. To help expand the language of this document, a sample job description is available in the Career & Employment Services section of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's (GCSAA) Web site (www.gcsaa.org/career).

Developing a general understanding of a superintendent's normal duties, members of a selection committee will also be better prepared to write a detailed job posting, respond to questions about the opening from interested candidates once it is published, and ask meaningful questions when interviewing final candidates. If a job description is already being used for conducting annual performance reviews, then it should be carefully

reviewed during the first meeting of the selection committee and updated, if necessary.

After penning a job description, the next step is to put together a salary and benefits package. This information is also needed to write a job posting, although exact details are not required for an advertisement (see Figure 1), and to answer phone calls from would-be candidates who want to learn more about the opportunity. Of special importance here is that the course's top officials must be in full agreement with the details of the package and, in particular, the maximum salary figure. If not, an awkward situation could develop should someone on the selection committee talk to a candidate about a higher salary figure than can be offered. Basic information on salaries and benefits is available in the *Compensation and Benefits Report* published by the GCSAA in Lawrence, Kansas. At a cost of \$400, this report summarizes local, state, and regional statistics based on a biennial survey of association members.

When assembling a salary and benefits package, the committee should decide whether or not to use an employment contract. Typically, such a document defines the terms and conditions of employment, compensation, and benefits; causes for termination; and annual bonus criteria. The advantage of such a document is that it can be used in final negotiations as a show of good faith with a top candidate concerned about employment stability. A sample employment contract is also available for public view in the Career & Employment Services section of the GCSAA's Web site. If using an employment contract is not preferred, then a straightforward offer letter covering the terms of employment should be drafted for later use in the hiring process.

ATTRACTING CANDIDATES

After finalizing the preliminary documents, the next big task is to create an invitation that will attract interested candidates. This effort starts with writing a detailed job posting that describes the position, the course, employment compensation, preferred qualifications, application deadline, and contact information. The goal is to write an advertisement that will interest candidates with credentials that match the position's responsibilities. This is accomplished by providing details about the facility and stating the preferred qualifications. For example, if the course has a high profile in the community and requires a rigorous

**Golf Course Superintendent
Prairie Fire Golf Club
Tallgrass, Illinois**

Course Description: Prairie Fire Golf Club is a planned, 18-hole facility that will indulge golf enthusiasts from all over the United States. Designed with ol' world links in mind, the course will be sited on 450 undisturbed acres of naturally occurring dunes in central Illinois. Sustainable maintenance standards will be supported by a state-of-the-art infrastructure and an estimated \$1.5 million annual budget. Pending superintendent selection, turf species establishment and construction details are yet to be determined.

Employment Compensation: A regionally competitive salary and benefits package will be negotiated with the final candidate. The terms and conditions of employment shall be specified in a written agreement.

Preferred Qualifications:

1. Twenty years of related experience, with ten years of experience as a golf course superintendent.
2. Bachelor of Science degree in environmental and/or turfgrass related studies.
3. Direct experience with native landscapes, course construction, major tournament preparations, and cool-season turfgrass management.
4. Accredited participation in GCSAA career development programs.
5. Proficient oral and written communication skills.

Application Deadline: November 1st; position available immediately.

Contact Information: Steven Underpaar, President & CEO
The Turning Point Development Co.
29 Halfway Circle
Golf, Illinois 81855
E-mail address: 7under@TheTurn.net

Note: All inquiries will be handled with strict confidentiality.

daily routine to maintain it in top condition, then stating a preference for candidates with ten or more years of experience may be entirely appropriate. Absent details, the selection committee may be inundated with résumés submitted by everyone taking a blind shot at a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Once the job posting has been suitably crafted, it is time to cast a wide net by getting it in front of as many eyes as possible. This is done by running an ad with the local and national superintendent associations, both of which charge a small fee to cover expenses. Also, it is a good idea to circulate the information among individuals who can share it with interested parties. While it is inappropriate to contact people for a short list of names simply to avoid the responsibility of conducting an objective candidate search, it is not inappropriate to request assistance with gaining the attention of a superintendent who might have an interest in moving should the right

Figure 1.
When posting an ad for an open position, specific details should be provided so as to create interest among candidates with credentials matching the job's responsibilities.



opportunity arise. Lastly, selection committee members who believe they know a good candidate should contact that person directly, as opposed to involving the employer, to find out if he or she might have an interest in pursuing the opening.

As a matter of procedure, upholding a firm policy of confidentiality is very important during all stages of the hiring process. Without it, the selection committee can easily construct a barrier between themselves and many candidates whose first priority is to protect their current position and avoid rumors of discontent. Understandably, when the time comes to check references over the phone, maintaining absolute confidentiality is virtually impossible; nonetheless, it is valuable for the committee members to continue their trek along high ground by using discretion regarding private conversations.

NARROWING THE FIELD

Every effort to publicize an available position will be rewarded with a significant number of

résumés, especially if the position carries with it some degree of professional prestige. Thus, it will be necessary to reduce the candidate pool to ten or so applicants for potential interviews. Initially, the only logical method of narrowing the field of candidates is a careful review of the submitted résumés.

To ensure an objective résumé review, a list of selection criteria must be established. The major criteria that pertain to the superintendent's profession include: level of formal education, years of experience, participation in continuing education or certification programs, and regional expertise. Other criteria that may be helpful in sorting a large group of résumés can include: environmental leadership, service to professional organizations, golf knowledge, and unique experience(s), e.g. course construction, major tournament preparations, etc. Whatever the circumstances, the goal is to tailor a list of criteria that is fair and balanced and to apply those criteria uniformly.

It is important to keep the applicant abreast of his/her status throughout the hiring process. This

is more than a simple matter of etiquette, as the superintendents' community can be exceptionally tight knit and the impolite handling of any one individual can spawn legitimate concern among a larger group. To keep an applicant current, a short letter should be mailed stating that the selection committee has received the résumé and that the candidate will be contacted as each phase of the hiring process unfolds.

Once the selection committee has identified ten or so leading candidates, the time has come to pick up the phone and start making calls to

challenge is to identify who among them is best suited for the position. The key is to create a stage on which the final candidates will have an equal opportunity to showcase their abilities. To help set the stage, a packet containing confidential information about the facility should be sent to each finalist. Such a packet should include the previous year's maintenance budget with a line item breakdown, the green committee's maintenance standards, a master plan summary (if applicable), past USGA Turf Advisory Service reports (if available), soil and water test reports, and an employee



Whether the golf course is located in a densely populated urban area or in a less populated location of the country, greater emphasis is placed on environmental issues and associated maintenance practices. Golf course superintendents with the skill sets to address these issues have an added advantage when competing for available job openings.

whittle the list down to three or four for interviews. The first calls should be made to the remaining candidates themselves. The threefold aim of these conversations is to clarify information stated on the résumé, gauge the candidate's true level of interest in the position, and evaluate general competency. As a word of caution, try to avoid reading too much between the lines. It may be difficult for some top candidates to fully express themselves over the phone. The second round of calls should be to references provided by each candidate and to individuals who are known to have working relationships with the candidates.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

With the candidate pool whittled down to a manageable number to interview, the remaining

organizational chart that includes position descriptions. Being provided with in-depth information about the facility, candidates will have the opportunity to talk specifics during the interview, as opposed to talking about what-if scenarios or other courses that have nothing to do with the subject at hand.

After the information packets are mailed out, each final candidate should be invited to tour the property before meeting with the selection committee. To give the impression that there is indeed sincere interest in meeting with each of the final candidates, it is always best to schedule visits to the course independently. If that is not feasible, then every effort should be made to keep the candidates separated at all times. Remember, interviewing is a two-way proposition. There is



no point in trying to attract the best and brightest available only to drive them away with carelessness or neglect before they can be hired.

We all like to feel appreciated. As every candidate deserves individual attention, it is good to have a prominent individual, such as the club president, on hand for an official welcoming. Simply telling someone to pick up a cart key at the golf shop when they arrive and drive themselves around the course sends good candidates running for home. If an employer cannot find the time to meet a candidate when he/she first arrives, why would a newly hired superintendent believe that he/she would get any attention whatsoever when coming to work seven days a week?

Tours of the property should include an opportunity to see every hole, the maintenance facility, and clubhouse. Further, as the intent of the tour is to give final candidates ample opportunity to gather information about golf operations, a knowledgeable host should be provided for each leg of the tour. For example, during the visit to the maintenance facility the outgoing superintendent or the assistant should be in attendance. Likewise, golf professionals make good hosts during the ride around the course, as they can provide valuable insight regarding playability issues. By including other staff members in the interview process, the selection committee can include their input when conducting the evaluation of the finalists.



The time has now come for the selection committee to meet each candidate behind closed doors. By this point, everyone in the room should be able to have an informed and intelligent conversation about what lies ahead. The onus, however, is squarely on the shoulders of the candidate, whose task it is to establish confidence in his/her abilities and to give a vision for upholding the maintenance standards, if not lifting them to a higher level. The members of the selection committee must now integrate all that they have learned through the selection process to discern fact from fiction and rate each candidate's capabilities.

At the conclusion of each interview, the selection committee should request a written

summary of the candidate's recommendations for the course with a prescribed due date, typically seven days. This report not only keeps the interview fresh in the minds of the selection committee's members, but it also offers an opportunity to evaluate written communication skills. It may also be desirable for the selection committee to seek an invitation from two or more finalists to visit their current places of employment. No committee member should ever show up unannounced, as it may create an awkward situation and jeopardize the confidentiality of the process.

Having covered all of the bases, the selection committee can now rank the final candidates in order of interest. This ranking should be based primarily on the quality of the interview, input

When a golf course hosts a golf championship, the ability to handle a large staff, both paid and volunteer, is an essential skill. Leadership and managerial skills of a potential golf course superintendent should be an important part of the selection criteria in any hiring situation, but special consideration should be given if a golf course has plans to host a large event.



To produce a high-quality golf course commensurate with triple-digit green fees, golf course owners must place special emphasis on hiring a superintendent with the ability to properly train, coordinate, and motivate the daily activities of a large maintenance staff.

from staff members who interacted with the candidates, the quality of the summary report, overall management style (communication skills, professionalism, leadership qualities, and organizational skills), and the credentials of the candidate. Rankings completed, an offer can then be made to the top candidate, pending a background check. Background checks should be conducted by a third party to separate course ownership from future litigation stemming from clerical errors in the acquired information.

Interestingly enough, there is a strong probability that the top candidate will decline a reasonable offer. Leading reasons often stated for such a decision include counteroffers from current employers and family circumstances arising from the proposed change in employment or a long-distance move. (Recall the comments about discerning a candidate's true interest in taking the position?) Given the significant odds against the top candidate accepting an offer, care should be taken to avoid letting the second- and possibly third-ranked candidates from becoming discouraged before all of the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed.

CONCLUSION

By this point, it probably has become obvious that using a well-conceived hiring process takes considerable time and effort. Hiring the right person to take on the responsibilities of superintendent is truly the first and, more accurately, the most important step towards maintaining a golf course in optimum condition. To find the best and brightest available, develop a sound strategy that openly invites all eligible candidates to the table and objectively evaluates each set of credentials. Then, follow the process through to the end without succumbing to the temptation of simply hiring someone who someone else thinks is the *right choice*. In the end, your effort will be rewarded each time you walk up to the first tee.

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