"So, Where Are You From Originally?" Using Ineffective and Inappropriate Questions in MIS Tenure-Track Job Interviews

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study examining the procedures used by information systems departments when recruiting for tenure track faculty. An overview of the relevant legal environment is presented, along with a review of the current recruiting procedures used by the IS discipline. The results of the study indicate that professors use ineffective and inappropriate interviewing techniques during job interviews, including inappropriate inquiries into a candidate's children, family, age, and country of origin.

Keywords: Faculty recruiting, interviewing, survey instrument

1. INTRODUCTION

The recruitment of a quality faculty is necessary for a university to achieve its strategic goals (Orr, 1993; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). An increased interest in business school majors, however, has resulted in an increasingly competitive market for business schools recruiting for faculty positions. The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) 1998-99 Faculty Salary Survey, for instance, indicated that new faculty hiring in business schools rose overall by 30%; the hiring of new assistant professors alone went up 32.7% over the 1997-98 figures (*1998-99 Salary Survey Results*, 1998a).

This high demand for faculty may be even worse within the information systems discipline. Companies are hiring MIS undergraduates at almost unprecedented rates (Jarvenpaa, Ives, and Davis, 1991; Ermel and Bohn, 1997); McGee, 1998; Veneri, 1998), perhaps fueled by new Internet development and millennium maintenance concerns. Businesses also are aggressively pursuing MIS Ph.D.'s, which contributes even more to the lack of qualified faculty candidates. One associate dean recently stated:

> "This past year was the toughest I've ever seen in aggressiveness for faculty. Other schools, and, in two cases, the private sector were being very aggressive in coming right after faculty in finance, MIS, marketing, economics and management" (*Is a Real Shortage Looming? Doctoral Faculty Demand Edges Upward Again*, 1998b).

As a result of this high demand, salaries for information systems professors have begun to rise. The 1998-99 AACSB Annual Faculty Salary Survey states that salaries averaged $69,000 for new IS doctorates, an average increase of 9.5% over the previous year (*1998-*

99 Salary Survey Results, 1998a). Unfortunately, while some universities have the resources to pay these higher salaries, many universities—especially public and smaller private universities—do not. Andrew Policano, a dean at The University of Wisconsin-Madison recently stated:

> "[Well-endowed universities] are in a situation where they can pick the cream of the crop from any public school in the country," Policano said. The offers include not only higher salaries, but reduced teaching loads and bonuses. Such recruiting takes talent away from the state universities' pool, which then forces less-endowed schools to reach down into the next tier, which reduces the pool the smaller schools have to choose from (*Is a Real Shortage Looming? Doctoral Faculty Demand Edges Upward Again*, 1998b).

The intense competition for candidates, therefore, may force some universities to lower their hiring standards in order to cover classes in high demand. A more desirable approach, of course, is for a university to hire quality faculty by utilizing a more effective recruiting process.

Indeed, given the importance of qualified faculty within a university, it is surprising that many universities spend little time training their staff on effective interviewing and recruiting techniques. In addition, untrained faculty who conduct interviews may utilize interviewing practices and questions that are inadvisable at best and illegal at worst (Srisavasdi, 1996). Given the litigious nature of today's society, this practice could expose universities to costly and embarrassing lawsuits.

This paper presents the results of a study of MIS doctoral students who were interviewing for tenure track positions. Section 2 presents an overview of the relevant legal environment. Section 3 reviews the current recruiting practices within the information systems discipline and presents the study's hypotheses. Section 4 discusses the research methodology. Section 5 summarizes the results, and Section 6 concludes the paper with a discussion of the results. The appendix offers recommendations for improving the interviewing environment, the interviewing process, and current practice for recruiting within the information systems discipline.

2. INTERVIEWING CANDIDATES: BACKGROUND ON THE CURRENT LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The main statute that defines discrimination is Title VII (*Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, 2000); Nunley, Serva, and Serva, 1998).[1] Title VII applies to companies of fifteen or more employees and prohibits hiring and employment decisions made on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Any person claiming discrimination under Title VII must first file a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The amount awarded by the EEOC for university discrimination cases has grown from $735,037 in 1991 to $4,912,057 in 1998 (1999 EEOC Data). During that time period, 4,903 charges of discrimination were filed against universities, which resulted in 967 monetary settlements of an average amount of $31,469[2] (1999 EEOC Data).

The various federal statutes defining discrimination restrict the type of information that can be gathered about job candidates. Gathering information about candidates, however, is the inherent goal of the interviewing process. An important guideline for interviewers, therefore, is to avoid inquiries into areas prohibited by the relevant statutes. In many cases, the questions themselves are not illegal. Questions covering sensitive topics may be asked, as long as they are relevant to the job. The problem often occurs in substantiating that claim of relevance. If a company can demonstrate that its questions are a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ) then the questions are legitimate and will not cause liability problems. An interviewer representing a Christian university may refuse to hire applicants who profess a belief in other religions—even though religion is a protected category under Title VII. If legally challenged, however, the university must be able to demonstrate that being a Christian is a BFOQ for a professor's position at that university. In another example, a senior faculty member confided to the author that his university frequently asks candidates if they

[1] Some of the other relevant Federal statutes include the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and 1871; the Government Employee Rights Act of 1991; the Age Discrimination in Employment Act; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; and the Family and Medical Leave Act.
[2] Because EEOC data does not designate the claimant's occupation, these figures reflect the number of charges filed against universities for all positions.

need job-hunting assistance for their spouse. The offer is genuine, but the inquiry also frequently brings out the candidate's marital status as a result ("I'm not married, but thank you" or "My wife would definitely be interested in that"). Even though the university would prefer to hire married people, the question offers potential liability since marital status is not a BFOQ for the position. "The general rule for any inquiry is simply this: Is this job-related? There's no reason to even let other issues enter into the conversation" (Litvan, 1996).

It is apparent that ignorance of employment law and proper pre-employment procedures is widespread. The fact remains that many employers continue to ask for date of birth on application forms and during interviews, even though such a practice has been outlawed since 1967 (Litvan, 1996). While a complete knowledge of appropriate pre-employment practices is probably too much to expect of any faculty member, interviewers should at least be aware of proper and improper interview guidelines.

3. CURRENT RECRUITING PROCEDURES AND HYPOTHESES

While departments need to annually monitor the legal environment, the recruiting procedures in information systems have remained largely the same for years. After receiving the candidates' curriculum vitae, universities interview candidates at various academic conferences—e.g., Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS), Decision Sciences Institute (DSI), and the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS)— where the interviewers have the opportunity to screen candidates. The interviews are typically short (around twenty to thirty minutes) and occur within a designated interview area at the conference hotel. While the ICIS and DSI conferences used to be the main interviewing venues, the emphasis seems to be switching to the AMCIS conference, perhaps because of increased competition, the conference's earlier date, and its annual location in the United States.

The conference interview process has advantages and disadvantages. Given that many candidates are immersed in writing their dissertation, traveling to one location to interview is an efficient use of their time. The environment also encourages candidates to present a paper to gain experience and confidence. Conferences are also advantageous from the university's perspective. Interviewers can attend a candidate's conference presentation, which provides more evidence of the candidate's abilities. Conferences enable interviewers to discuss a candidate's merits with the candidate's advisors, perhaps resulting in a more honest appraisal of the potential fit between university and candidate.

One disadvantage, however, is the interviewing environment. The noise level in the designated conference area is considerable, often requiring both interviewer and interviewee to raise their voices to uncomfortable levels. To avoid these difficulties, some schools conduct interviews in private hotel rooms. Conducting one-on-one interviews within a hotel room is unadvisable from a legal perspective and can create an uncomfortable interviewing environment for the job candidate. Having more than one interviewer present is desirable, therefore, but forces a university to send two interviewers instead of one. This rationale leads to the following hypotheses:

> *H1: While a majority of conference interviews will be conducted in public areas, a significant percentage will be conducted in private hotel rooms.*
> *H2: Of the interviews conducted in private hotel rooms, a majority will be conducted by one person.*

Asking appropriate questions and keeping the environment professional is critical for an effective interviewer. Inappropriate questions during a job interview tend to involve personal issues (family life, marital status, or age) or citizenship (country of residence or origin) (Scalise and Smith, 1986; Litvan, 1996; Perez, 1997). To minimize potential liability, most companies have trained human resources managers conduct the interviews. This practice is difficult to implement when hiring academic faculty, however. Human resources professionals at universities cannot assess the validity of a job candidate's dissertation, nor are they qualified to assess the person's teaching ability. Since the candidate will be working with other faculty members in a department, most faculty want to meet and screen candidates to see if they will "mesh" with the existing department.

One answer to this problem would be to train the recruiters in appropriate interviewing questions and practices. Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate, however, that few universities do any training of their recruiting committees. One of the authors of this paper interviewed a senior faculty member at a university in the southwest and asked open-ended questions about her experiences in recruiting faculty. She stated in a written email letter:

> … no one trains anyone for [interviewing job candidates]—there's NO received wisdom at all. People do incredible things; it's true…. I tell [my doctoral students] "never forget that you are dealing with amateurs!" The people processing your applications, answering your phone calls, setting up your interviews, interviewing you and giving you feedback are HIGHLY LIKELY to be COMPLETE NOVICES (that is, they've never done this before and may never do it again, and whoever did it before is either gone or not credible for advice and guidance) [emphases hers] (personal communication, July 17, 1997).

Because a lack of training or knowledge transfer can lead to inappropriate interviewing practices, we propose the following hypotheses:

> *H3: A majority of job candidates will be asked inappropriate questions about their personal life during job interviews.*
> *H4: A significant number of job candidates will be asked inappropriate questions about their nationality or citizenship.*

4. Research Methodology

This section presents the study's research methodology, including the details of the pilot study, background on the sample, and data collection procedures.

Table 1: Pilot Study Results

Inappropriate or Ineffective Practices	1. I was asked whether or not my wife was in academia, what areas she is interested in, and what she is conducting research in. 2. When they took me out to dinner, they asked me where I was from originally and whether or not I had children. I wasn't sure how to answer. 3. On the campus interviews, I was asked whether or not my spouse would need a job if we moved. Another interviewer asked if I would need information about the quality of schools in the area. 4. Interviewers often are not prepared for the interview. Instead, they review the file at the beginning of the interview. When this happens, I feel like the school probably isn't interested in me.
Effective Practices	5. [During conference interviews], I like questions related to issues within the paper that I have to present. These questions allowed me to focus on my skills, gather my thoughts, and relax me. 6. I like questions that asked about my favorite teachers and their styles and why teaching is important.

4.1 The Pilot Study

A pilot study was first conducted to learn more about the nature of the hiring practices for tenure track faculty in information systems. The purposes of the pilot were to:

- Ask open-ended questions of the participants to learn more about the hiring process
- Ascertain the participants' level of candor and willingness to participate
- Clarify the survey instrument

Pilot participants were selected at random from the 1997 DSI conference list. None of the pilot participants was contacted for the actual study. Because of the small number of candidates in the prospective sample (forty-nine), only six candidates were contacted for the pilot. Of the six participants, all were willing to participate. Comments from the pilot study participants are listed in Table 1. Participants were asked to report effective and inappropriate/ineffective recruiting experiences. The participants indicated some evidence for inappropriate practices during job interviews (Comments 1, 2, and 3). Candidates also commented that interviewers were occasionally unprepared (Comment 4). On the positive

Table 2: Data Collected

Demographic Data	• University Attended • Current Position Held • Area of Concentration • EEOC Classification • Nationality
Conference and Campus Interview Information	• Number of Interviews • Location of Interviews • Number of Interviewers Present
Interview Outcome Information	• Number of Offers Received
Types of Questions Asked During Interviews	1. **Children.** Have you ever been asked questions regarding children, for example: a) Do you have any children? b) How old are your children? c) Are you planning on having children in the future? 2. **Family.** Have you ever been asked: a) Do you have any family obligations that would interfere with your ability to do the job? b) Are you married? c) What does your spouse do for a living? 3. **Age.** Have you ever been asked about your age, for example: a) How old are you? b) When were you born? 4. **Nationality/Country of Origin**. Have you ever been asked questions regarding your nationality, for example: a) What country are you a citizen of? b) Where are you from originally?

side, interviewers used procedures to relax the candidate (Comment 5), and asked situational questions designed to determine what candidates would do under certain circumstances (Comments 6 and 7).

4.2 The Research Sample and Collection Procedures

The 1997 Placement Directory for the Decision Sciences Institute (DSI) provided contact information for the survey participants. Job candidates were contacted by phone in the spring and summer of 1998. All job candidates who listed information systems as their primary or secondary interest area were contacted. Interviewers included the authors and graduate assistants. Participation was voluntary, and contacts were given the opportunity not to participate in the study.

Of the forty-three candidates contacted, two candidates stated that they preferred not to participate. The results reported in this section, therefore, will be for the remaining forty-one candidates. Table 2 lists the data collected.

5. RESULTS

Of the forty-one job candidates who participated in the telephone interviews, thirty-four were male and seven were female. Ten participants (24%) had not yet completed their dissertation proposal; sixteen (39%) had completed their proposal and were working on their dissertation; two (5%) had completed the dissertation but had not yet defended it; and thirteen (32%) had completed the dissertation defense. On average, candidates attended between twelve and thirteen interviews at the DSI conference. Candidates who had completed their proposal and were working on the dissertation (n=16) received the highest mean number of job offers (1.79); in contrast, candidates who had completed their dissertation and final defense (n=13) received an average of 0.69 offers. Candidates who had not yet completed their proposal (n=10) received an average of 0.78 offers.

Table 3 lists the breakdown for students' EEOC classification, which indicates the sample consists largely of Caucasian and Asian/Pacific Islanders. For nationality, the largest groups are from the United States (61%), India (15%), and China (7%). Other represented countries include Canada (5%), Japan (5%), South Korea (5%), and Israel (2%).

To gauge the variety of universities attended by job candidates, The Carnegie Classification was used (Table 4). This schema provides some insight into universities' emphasis on research. The classification scheme is broad and includes nine categories, from a Research I classification to Associate of Arts. Given the terminal

Table 3: Sample Breakdown by EEOC Classification and Nationality

EEOC Classification	Count	Nationality	Count
Caucasian	26	US	25
Asian/Pacific Islander	13	Indian	6
Native American	1	Chinese	3
Missing	1	Canadian	2
		Japanese	2
		South Korean	2
		Israeli	1
Grand Total	41	Grand Total	41

Table 4: The Carnegie Classification

The 1994 Carnegie Classification includes all colleges and universities in the United States that are degree-granting and accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education.

Research Universities I	These institutions offer a full range of baccalaureate programs, are committed to graduate education through the doctorate, and give high priority to research. They award 50 or more doctoral degrees each year. In addition, they receive annually $40 million or more in federal support.
Research Universities II	These institutions offer a full range of baccalaureate programs, are committed to graduate education through the doctorate, and give high priority to research. They award 50 or more doctoral degrees each year. In addition, they receive annually between $15.5 million and $40 million in federal support.
Doctoral Universities I	These institutions offer a full range of baccalaureate programs and are committed to graduate education through the doctorate. They award at least 40 doctoral degrees annually in five or more disciplines.
Doctoral Universities II	These institutions offer a full range of baccalaureate programs and are committed to graduate education through the doctorate. They award annually at least ten doctoral degrees—in three or more disciplines—or 20 or more doctoral

nature of the surveyed students' degrees, however, only Research I, Research II, Doctoral I, and Doctoral II universities were relevant to this study. Twenty-five out of forty-one students (61%) attended a Research I school for their doctorate; five (12%) attended a Research II school; and eleven (27%) attended a university with a Doctoral I classification. None of the study participants attended a school with a Doctoral II classification.

5.1 Hypotheses Results

Job candidates stated that an average of 68.5% of conference interviews was held in a public area, such as the conference placement center. The remaining 31.5% of interviews was conducted in private areas, such as hotel rooms. Of the interviews that were conducted in a private area, 43% of the interviews involved only one interviewer. Approximately one out of three interviews, therefore, are conducted in private hotel rooms. This result lends support to Hypothesis 1. The finding that single interviewers conduct only two out of five hotel room interviews is less than the majority expected in Hypothesis 2.

Participants were asked whether they had been asked any of the questions listed in Table 2 during a conference job interview for a tenure track faculty position. Because most campuses collect EEOC classification data as part of the hiring process, candidates were specifically asked to disregard these forms and consider only questions asked during campus and conference interviews.

Of the forty-one candidates, eighteen (44%) stated they had been asked questions regarding children, and twenty-three (56%) were asked about their marital status. Only three applicants (7%) had been asked questions about their age. In total, twenty-nine out of the forty-one job candidates (71%) stated they had been asked at least one inappropriate question about their family or age. Hypothesis 3, therefore, is supported. Regarding nationality, fourteen out of the forty-one applicants (34%) had been asked inappropriate questions about their citizenship, supporting Hypothesis 4.[3]

[3] Not surprisingly, the frequency that candidates were asked inappropriate questions about their nationality was related to their EEOC classification. Seven out of nineteen Caucasian candidates (27%) reported inappropriate nationality questions, while six out of fourteen (43%) non-Caucasian candidates reported inappropriate questions. The number of observations in each cell is small, however, and should be interpreted with caution.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study found that about two-thirds (68.5%) of all conference interviews were conducted in the conference's designated interviewing area, which tends to be noisy and distracting for both interviewer and candidate. While ideal environments are typically not readily available at any of the recruiting conferences, interviewers should attempt to provide a setting that is more conducive to an effective interview. Many hotels have seating in low-traffic areas of the hotel; indeed, conference committees should actively pursue hotels with such accommodations when seeking out conference facilities.

Other options do exist at most conferences. Conference attendees may want to book rooms on the hotel's concierge floor, for example. The reserved concierge areas are often underutilized during the day and can offer a quiet alternative. While access requires an additional charge, it may be one that universities would be willing to support. If such options are not available, interviewers should consider area restaurants, parks, and even shopping malls. Given their less formal setting and opportunities for more relaxed conversation, these areas can be effective interviewing environments, especially during off-peak hours.

The number of one-on-one interviews conducted in hotel rooms was less than the expected majority (43%), but still represents a significant number of interviews. Even though a hotel room is typically quieter and more conducive to open dialogue, the practice can result in an increased chance of litigation. This situation is especially a concern when the interviewer is interviewing a candidate of the opposite sex:

> I have known examples in which a woman was so disturbed by the experience of being interviewed by men in a hotel bedroom that she refused to consider a particular college further, even though the department that had inadvertently alienated her genuinely wanted to increase the number of women on its faculty (Bouchard, 1990).

If universities plan to use hotel rooms for interviews, they should be willing to send multiple interviewers. Ideally, one of these candidates should be female. If universities are unwilling to send multiple interviewers to a conference, attendees should seek out colleagues from other universities to sit in on interviews. In addition to mitigating a candidate's uneasy feelings, the

colleague can even offer a second opinion of the candidates' performance during the interview.

The frequency of inappropriate personal questions during job interviews is surprising. This study found that 18 out of 41 candidates (44%) were asked questions about children. One possible explanation is the presence of small talk during many job interviews. Small talk is a societal norm often used to ease into the more formal interviewing process. Indeed, it is commonplace for it to include questions about family and background, which are inappropriate inquiries for a job interview. Faculty must understand that they cannot turn interviews on and off: questions must remain within the constraints of the law, whether they were asked during a formal interview with the department chair or during an informal dinner at a restaurant.

The nationality of job candidates is another topic often raised when making small talk. The seemingly innocuous question, "Where are you from, originally?" demonstrates interest in the candidates' background, as well as a common area of interest to enhance a conversation. Such a question can contribute to the contention that candidates were not hired, however, because of their ethnic background.[4] The finding that approximately one out of three job candidates were asked inappropriate questions about nationality is indeed surprising, especially considering that Caucasians made up 26 out of the 41 candidates in our sample.

The results of this study indicate that some interviewers are not aware that certain interview questions are inappropriate. Moreover, if faced with a discrimination lawsuit, universities that conduct no training will find it difficult to hold a professor accountable. While reducing the chance of litigation is advantageous, effective interviewing procedures reap other benefits as well. Given the competitive nature of the information systems job market, universities utilizing more effective interviewing techniques stand a better chance of retaining their newly hired professors and will need to hire candidates less often. One source states that the typical interview process followed by employers is only three percent better than pulling out names from a hat (Bolles, 1993).

A limitation of this study is that only applicants from the Decision Sciences Institutes annual conference were surveyed. While this limitation was necessary given the researchers available time and resources, a more complete study should be conducted by including AMCIS and ICIS applicants. The authors of this paper plan to propose a training session at a national conference to inform interviewers of the results of this study and to train participants in effective hiring practices.

It is not the author's contention that this study's findings are unique to information systems. Improvements could no doubt be made in many academic disciplines. Information systems should realize, however, that some disciplines have taken a more proactive approach to these difficulties. The Academy of Management, for instance, has released interviewing guidelines that include the use of faculty who have been trained in effective interviewing techniques, an interview question list, and the use of multiple interviewers.

With the exception of educating students, hiring faculty is possibly the most important function a department can perform. Universities need to realize that their enterprise's academic performance results directly from the effectiveness of the interviewing and hiring procedures instituted within their departments. Also important is the realization that the interviewing process is often the first impression a job candidate receives from a university. One uninformed faculty member can subject a university to potential lawsuits. Perhaps even worse, unprepared interviewers communicate that the candidate's presence is not important, or perhaps even an annoyance. For this reason, we recommend that information systems departments review their current hiring procedures to determine if improvements could be made to their hiring process. While reducing the chance of litigation is always important, improving the hiring procedures should also result in hiring better researchers, better teachers, and better colleagues.

[4] The U.S. Government requires government contractors and subcontractors take affirmative action (AA) to ensure that all individuals have an equal opportunity for employment. Many universities voluntarily comply with AA guidelines. To ensure that the divulgence of this information is used only to benefit minorities, however, a university department must separate the Voluntary AA information from the application and process this information separately.

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