

Articles

Ethics in Talent Acquisition at a Small College

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This case is designed for undergraduate students studying human resource management or small business management. It is best suited for a unit focused on the employment and hiring process, or on operational planning. The case also highlights how these processes can influence the psychological contract between employers and employees in small to mid-size businesses.

Learning Objectives

- Critique the hiring process and defend how it can help attract and retain talent.
- Assess the role of communication and trust in establishing a psychological contract between employees and managers in small businesses.
- Examine the ethical considerations in employment contracts and their implications for termination or rescission of offers.

Introduction

After an extensive and exhaustive search this past spring, John was selected as the best candidate to teach all of K. College's undergraduate operations management courses in the fall. K. College is a small liberal arts college located in the New England area with limited resources. Unfortunately, it appears that John will not be joining the faculty at K. College, after all. Steve, the department chair, is distraught since John was scheduled to be the primary instructor for these courses and is wondering what went wrong. K. College operates much like a small business due to its size, limited student population, and budgetary constraints, which means that staffing decisions can have a significant impact on its overall operations. In such an environment, ethical decision-making and integrity play a crucial role in ensuring long-term success, maintaining trust among faculty and students, and supporting the college's mission despite resource limitations.

The Hiring Process

Steve remembers vividly the hiring process. When the position was made available due to a retirement, he had worked early in the fall with K. College's HR director to finalize the position description, which was approved by the Dean and subsequently advertised in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (print and website), the Academy of Management listserv and career website, and a few websites aimed at minority applicants to attract a board and diverse number of applicants. He worked with his own faculty to

reach out to regional Ph.D. programs to advertise the position, often a good source of freshly minted talent. Applicants had to submit their applications to the chair of the search committee, who serves as the hiring manager, led by Margie. A committee was formed (2 from the department, including Margie, with one from outside of the department) as per the standard hiring process set by K. College. Margie reported that 32 individuals submitted complete applications, which included an application letter detailing why they had applied for the position and how they qualified, a current resume, a teaching philosophy statement, and finally evidence of effective instruction (i.e., course evaluation scores). The committee reviewed the applicants in October, determining that 14 applicants qualified based on their terminal degree in the specialty and teaching interest. The committee conducted eight phone interviews with all members of the committee present. The committee used a scale to rank each candidate based on the job expectations (qualified to teach, effective teacher, scholastic potential, and whether the candidates would fit into the teaching culture of K. College). The committee compiled its ranking to finalize three candidates to bring to campus. The three candidate CVs were reviewed and approved by the Dean. Margie worked diligently to invite the three candidates on campus, including scheduling overnight stays, a visit by a local realtor, a social dinner with all nine members of the department before his full day of on-campus interviews, and a full day of one-on-one meeting with each department member, a research presentation with the entire School of Business, and a teaching presentation observed by all members of the committee. Quickly, John emerged as a top candidate. He had already been interviewed at K. College. He knew the faculty from his first visit, and he was very effective and personable with students during his teaching presentation. Following the last on-campus interview, the committee solicited feedback from the department, asking for a ranking of candidates by the end of the week. John emerged as a top candidate using both the departmental and committee rankings. The dean was informed of the ranking and concurred with the committee based on his own experience. Subsequently, she called John by phone to confirm his in-

terest in joining the faculty. After the usual salary package negotiation, John verbally accepted the position at K. College and subsequently signed a contract this past May with the clear stipulation in his contract that he was to report to work the second Monday in August to start his onboarding process (orientation, training, HR processing), with the first class starting after Labor Day. He was hired as the only faculty member to teach all four sections of the course, replacing a faculty member who resigned this past year and would not return the following year. Because of his specialty in the field, John will be the only person in the department with the expertise and experience to teach these courses.

A Change of Heart?

Today is the second Monday in August, John's first day at work at K. College after spending the summer conducting research. Per his request, John is meeting with Steve, the management department chair at K. College, to talk about a "few matters." The meeting had just ended with John leaving the building, to the surprise of the office staff and the remaining faculty, who were ready to welcome him. They had not seen him since he came to campus to interview for the opening.

After John leaves his office, Steve, visibly upset, proceeds to the Dean's office, where he asks to speak to the Dean. Behind closed doors, Steve reports to the Dean that John just announced to him that he would not be joining the faculty this fall. John's reason was that he had signed two contracts, one at K. College and another at Central State University, where he had been teaching for the past three years. Although he had accepted and signed a contract in May to work at K. College this coming fall, personal matters he did not want disclosed led him to renew his contract at the Central State University during the summer (after he had signed the contract with K. College). Steve asked John if he had informed Central State University in May that he had accepted a position at K. College and John was somewhat evasive. Steve attempted to seek clarification when John renewed with Central, and John elected not to answer the question. More troubling, he did not inform K. College of this development until today. A quick call to the Human Resources director by the Dean confirms that the employment contract is not binding, as it is an employment-at-will arrangement between the two parties. This means that K. College is unable to enforce the signed contract because it is unclear which of these contracts supersedes the other. This comes as a total surprise to Steve, who had believed he had established a strong bond with John after accepting the offer. He recalls reviewing the job description over the phone in June, providing details on what kind of moving expenses would be covered by the institution and to what maximum amount, and even arranging to order John's books for him at the bookstore in anticipation of the coming semester.

This incident occurred two weeks before the beginning of the academic year, leaving four sections of the department's required courses uncovered. Steve and the Dean are still unclear on how they will find coverage for the course that is scheduled during the daytime throughout the week

(something adjuncts who work full-time elsewhere might not be able to cover). They know that a regular search for an opening usually takes many months. It is challenging to find adjunct faculty who are available to teach during the day. Furthermore, the new faculty member was going to be instrumental in providing a knowledgeable and committed instructor to teach operations management. This is equivalent to a small business needing to hire a specialized, skilled employee, where market conditions limit the supply of employees. They are trying to understand the ethical and legal implications for all parties, including addressing the need for a knowledgeable and committed instructor to teach operations management. They are also trying to understand the ethical and legal implications for all parties, including providing and addressing the need for a knowledgeable and committed instructor to teach operations management, they are trying to understand the ethical and legal implications for all parties, including service to the institution and improving research productivity for the department. To save the college's reputation and the need for a knowledgeable and committed instructor to teach operations management, they are trying to understand the ethical and legal implications of all parties, John and K. College.

John's History at K. College

This is not the first time that John, an assistant professor of operations management, is considered for an opening at the college. He was a finalist for the same position three years ago at K. College. He was offered the job then, too, but declined the offer to join the faculty, citing insufficient remuneration, and took what turned out to be a better-paying job. However, it was speculated by some members of the department at K. College that John might not have accepted the job because of the pressure he might have felt from the Dean, who told him that a regular presence was required from junior faculty members (showing up at school four days a week to interact with students and faculty members was strongly recommended and expected). He lived 100 miles from K. College at the time of the first offer and had planned to commute on his teaching days only (two days a week). Although the current turn of events came as a great surprise, Dean and Steve, the department chair, now question their decision to offer John the position this time around.

Your HR Expertise

You are asked to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the situation so that the Dean can report to the Provost of K. College what has happened and outline the next steps by answering the following questions. Remember that in a small business context, a Dean is a manager and a Provost is a director.

Questions

1. Analyze K College's hiring process from the perspective of a small business owner/operator. Did they follow best practices? Was it effective?
2. Evaluate if there was a psychological contract between K. College and John. What happened to that contract?
3. In your view, did John demonstrate integrity and follow-through on his commitments?
4. What could Steve and/or the university have done differently? You cannot assume you can find someone qualified to fill the position (especially covering four sections).

Teaching Notes

Abstract

This case examines the crucial connections between the hiring process, the psychological contract, and potential professional integrity issues in employment decision-making common to small businesses. After undergoing a comprehensive multi-step recruitment process, John accepted the position but unexpectedly decided to decline just two weeks before the start of the school year, revealing that he had signed a competing contract with his former institution. This situation raises significant concerns regarding the responsibilities of both employees and employers during the hiring process, particularly regarding the integrity expected from candidates once a formal employment agreement has been signed. The case encourages a broader discussion about the ethical limitations of employment, the vulnerabilities present in the hiring process, and the moral obligations of each party to ensure that professional conduct is upheld throughout the hiring process.

Methodology

This case is disguised but reflects an actual situation experienced by one of the authors who worked at a small college with limited resources. The case was tested in the classroom using undergraduate students.

Recommended Book and Case Placement

There are many books on Human Resource Management or Small Business Management. We happen to focus on

- Valentine, S., Meglich, P. A., Mathis, R. L., & Jackson, J. H. (2025). *Human Resource Management* (17th ed.). Cengage.
- Longenecker, J. G., Petty, J. W., Palich, L. E., and Oy, F. (2023). *Small Business Management* (19th ed.). Cengage.

The case should be used in a classroom versus given as an assignment and positioned/used after covering the following important topics in Part 2 of the above HRM book, which focuses on the Jobs and Labor issues with the focus on Hiring processes, which encompass the following sequence:

- Job Analysis (defining the requirements/specifications) (Ch. 4)
- Recruiting (building an applicant pool) (Ch. 6)
- Selecting (including placement/fit, screening, and testing) (Ch. 7)
- Hiring (including offers) (Ch. 7)
- Onboarding (Ch. 7)

Chapter 5 focuses on "Individual/Organization Relations and Retention" (Employee Engagement) where Individual Motivation through Expectancy Theory (Victor Vroom) and Equity Theory (both in sec. 5-1b) are covered but leading to covering Psychological Contract (sec. 5-2a).

Or in Part 5 of the Small Business Management book, which focuses on Managing Human Resources considerations. Chapter 20 focuses on all human resource management functions critical to the successful operation of a small business, including explaining the importance of the recruitment process (section 20-2).

Assignment Questions

1. Analyze K College's hiring process. Did they follow best practices? Was it effective? Analyze K College's hiring process from the perspective of a small business.

The literature emphasizes that a multi-step hiring process can contribute to positive hiring outcomes. Instructors have the option to use Appendix A as a guide for students to review the hiring process at K College, using the case as an example.

Step 1: Develop & Approve the Job Requisition

The job requisition represents an organization's initial push to "prioritize the efforts of human resource practitioners to focus on candidates that are likely of high quality, that are likely to accept a job offer if made one, and that are likely to remain with the organization for the long term" (Mehta et al., 2013). It is a formal document that authorizes the HR department or department to initiate the recruitment process for a specific position, detailing the job title, department, reporting structure, salary range, and a summary of the essential duties and responsibilities (Azmy, 2018). The requisition should also outline the required qualifications, including education, experience, skills, and any necessary certifications or licenses. In educational settings, this might include specific teaching credentials, subject matter expertise, or experience working with particular age groups or special needs populations (Minago, 2019). The crafting of a meticulously detailed job requisition serves as the bedrock for a successful recruitment campaign, ensuring that the ensuing search attracts candidates whose competencies and professional aspirations are in harmonious alignment with the institution's overarching strategic objectives and pedagogical mission (Schneider et al., 2006). Managers must collaborate with HR to ensure the requisition aligns with budgetary constraints, staffing plans, and legal requirements (Mallillin et al., 2024).

Teaching Plan

Time	Activity	Goals	Instructor Prompts
0–8 min	Introduction & Objectives	Establish learning expectations and provide the case as a handout, while prohibiting collaboration.	Clearly state the case context and learning objectives, ensuring students read the case independently first.
8–10 min	Case Recap & Group Formation	Make sure everyone has a clear understanding of the facts and review the questions asked (Optional: handout Appendix A).	Ask students to point out important facts in the case randomly, then break the class into groups and instruct them to develop a consensus.
10–35 min	Issues & Analysis	Teams collaborate to diagnose the issues and apply key course concepts, such as the hiring process, psychological contract, and ethics, to the analysis of questions one to three.	1. Instructor walks around and facilitates class discussion using the discussion questions as prompts. 2. Group representatives report to the class.
35–45 min	Optional Poll on Ethics	Students are polled and asked to explain their reasoning.	Facilitate a discussion that highlights various ethical frameworks by compiling students' reasoning for their Yes, Not sure, and No answers.
45–55 min	Decision	Students are requested to share their recommendations regarding the process outlined in question 4.	Encourage students to concentrate on the process.
55–60 min	Wrap-up	Emphasize and link the main points to human resource management (HRM) theory and practice.	Summarize insights from each group while linking to course objectives and content using the suggested responses to each question in the IM.

Step 2: Post the Job Accurately & Widely

Following the approval of the job requisition, a critical next step involves developing and disseminating a job posting that is both precise and appealing to a diverse candidate pool (Shaghghi et al., 2011). The job posting must translate the requirements of the requisition into compelling language that attracts qualified candidates, detailing the role's responsibilities, required qualifications, and the institution's values and culture. In the educational sector, these postings should highlight the unique opportunities for professional growth, the chance to impact students' lives, and any specific benefits tailored to educators, such as professional development stipends or tuition reimbursement (Babullah, 2024).

Step 3: Screen Applications Promptly & Fairly

Once applications begin to arrive, the next crucial step involves meticulously screening them to identify candidates who possess the minimum qualifications and desired competencies for the role, aligning with the recruitment process of seeking and attracting a pool of people from which qualified candidates can be chosen (Vincent, 2019). HR departments must implement a structured and legally compliant screening process, leveraging tools such as applicant tracking systems to manage and evaluate a high volume of applications efficiently (Walek et al., 2021). Discrimination based on a protected class (ex., race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, and disability) is illegal (Quillian & Midtbøen, 2021).

Step 4: Verify Candidate Credentials

Following the initial screening phase, a critical juncture is reached where the credentials of the shortlisted candidates undergo meticulous verification to ascertain the precision and veracity of their claimed qualifications (Bills, 1992). In higher education contexts, this process is particularly critical, given the stringent accreditation standards and the necessity of ensuring that faculty members possess the requisite academic qualifications and professional certifications (Wallwork, 2014). It is essential to validate educational degrees, professional licenses, and any other certifications that are pertinent to the role.

Step 5: Schedule Interviews with Stakeholders

The interview stage is a pivotal component of the hiring process, affording the hiring manager and relevant stakeholders a chance to engage directly with candidates to assess their qualifications, experience, and cultural fit (Roselius & Kleiner, 2000). It is during these interviews that the subtle nuances of a candidate's personality, communication style, and problem-solving abilities come to the forefront, offering invaluable insights that extend beyond the confines of a resume or application form (AI, 2023). Structured interviews improve reliability, validity, and fairness (Campion et al., 1997; McCarthy et al., 2010) and create consistency, which can have a significant impact on HRM practices in small businesses (Heneman et al., 2000).

Step 6: Use a Standardized, Impartial Scoring Rubric

To mitigate subjectivity and ensure fairness in the candidate evaluation process, it is paramount to employ a standardized scoring rubric that articulates the specific criteria

and competencies deemed essential for success in the role (*Guide: Use Structured Interviewing*, 2023). This rubric should be meticulously crafted to reflect the key performance indicators and desired attributes outlined in the job description, providing a structured framework for assessing each candidate's strengths and weaknesses (Guest, 2004).

Step 7: Maintain Clear & Consistent Candidate Communication

Throughout the hiring process, maintaining transparent and consistent communication with candidates is essential (Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021). Make the candidate feel valued and respected, even if they are not your top choice. Continue communication even after the candidate has been hired, checking in often during onboarding.

Step 8: Extend Offer & Ensure Acceptance

The final stage in the hiring process involves extending a formal job offer to the selected candidate, outlining the terms and conditions of employment, including salary, benefits, start date, and any other pertinent details (*Job Offers: Do's and Don'ts*, 2022). It is imperative that the offer is presented in a professional and timely manner, allowing the candidate sufficient time to carefully review and consider the terms (Barcelos, 2019). Offer letters should be reviewed by legal counsel to ensure compliance with all applicable laws and regulations, as well as by the human resources team (Sakyi et al., 2020).

Step 9: Ensure Compliance & Non-Discrimination

HR monitors each step for legal compliance (EEOC, ADA, FMLA, Title IX, etc.). Hiring and employment practices must be nondiscriminatory with regard to race, religion, national origin, age, sex, or disability (Roselius & Kleiner, 2000). Small businesses are often non-compliant due to the fixed costs associated with compliance. The literature emphasizes that compliance-by-design, including following template processes and recording-keeping practices, could improve compliance (Hodgson et al., 2009). Organizations should maintain records of hiring steps and decisions for audit purposes (Tyson, 2005). Hiring team members should be coached to ensure that any questions asked to the candidate are related to the job requirements and are not discriminatory (Lentz, 2020). The implementation of automated hiring processes, while offering potential efficiencies, necessitates a careful consideration of fairness and transparency (Langenkamp et al., 2020).

Step 10: Evaluate & Improve the Process

Any process requiring human intervention is prone to error. This is especially true for small businesses that lack the necessary resources. Utilizing a process of continuous improvement, which promotes systems thinking, allows organizations to adapt and evolve in times of change (Kaufman et al., 2006). Hiring processes need to be customized to an organization's needs and modified based on evaluation. Soliciting anonymous feedback from candidates and committee members can be a useful tool (Krasman, 2015). Tracking time-to-hire, offer acceptance rate, retention rate,

and diversity metrics gives leaders quantitative data that can be useful in informing key business decisions. The evaluation process extends beyond recruiting to employee engagement (Reena et al., 2019).

Instructor Guidance for Supplement to Appendix A Assignment

Step 1: Develop & Approve the Job Requisition

- Define role responsibilities, required qualifications, salary range, and reporting structure.
- Obtain approvals from department heads and HR.
- Ensure job descriptions use inclusive language and align with university and legal standards.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **The position and associated job description were reviewed and approved by the dean following a review by the HR department or the hiring manager.**

Step 2: Post the Job Accurately & Widely

- Publish the role on the university website, relevant academic and industry boards, and diversity-focused job platforms.
- Include key info: responsibilities, required and preferred qualifications, benefits, location (on-site/remote), and application deadline.
- Ensure job ads comply with local, state, federal, and international hiring laws.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **The position was widely advertised. The posting included key information about the role and satisfied all hiring laws.**

Step 3: Screen Applications Promptly & Fairly

- Use an applicant tracking system (ATS) to flag qualified candidates based on objective criteria.
- HR and hiring committee perform initial review within 2 weeks of posting deadline.
- Disqualify incomplete or clearly unqualified submissions early.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **Applications were promptly screened, and interviews were scheduled. It is unknown if an ATS was used to flag candidates based on objective criteria.**

Step 4: Verify Candidate Credentials

- Confirm degrees, certifications, work history, and eligibility to work (including international visa status if

applicable). Universities will often require advanced degrees and a history of publication.

- Conduct background and reference checks in compliance with applicable privacy laws.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **John's credentials and background were verified, however there is no evidence that John's experience as an applicant was discussed during the verification process. Small businesses often lack the resources to conduct a thorough candidate validation process. John had previously applied for a position at K College, was offered a role, and declined the job offer. It is plausible that John's previous declination could provide additional insight into his credibility and character or help establish a pattern.**

Step 5: Schedule Interviews with Stakeholders

- Coordinate with faculty, HR, and department leadership for panel interviews.
- Provide candidates with interview format and expectations in advance.
- Ensure interviewers are trained in bias, diversity, and legal compliance.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **John successfully navigated several interviews with a variety of department and campus stakeholders.**

Step 6: Use a Standardized, Impartial Scoring Rubric

- Create a scoring sheet aligned with job criteria (e.g., teaching, research, service, communication).
- Require interviewers to submit scores independently and document rationale.
- Use aggregate scores and consensus discussions for final decisions.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown ☒

- **K College asked that members of the committee and the department rank the candidates, although it is not clear if the ranking alone was used to assess the top contender.**

Step 7: Maintain Clear & Consistent Candidate Communication

- Acknowledge application receipt, confirm next steps, and provide updates after each hiring stage.
- Assign an HR contact for candidate support and questions.
- Be transparent about timeline and delays.
- Overcommunicate, exercise empathy, and ensure that the candidate feels valued.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown ☒

- **K College and Steve proactively communicated with John; however, it is unknown if other entities within the university did the same. A human resources specialist or director can augment the hiring manager by reaching out to the candidate to discuss information such as benefits (e.g., health insurance, retirement, relocation), as well as the I-9 Employment Eligibility Verification process. There is no evidence within the case that the human resources department made this effort. It is essential to note that in the case of small businesses, resources are often limited.**

Step 8: Extend Offer & Ensure Acceptance

- Deliver a competitive, clear written offer, including salary, benefits, and start date.
- Follow up with a personalized call or meeting to answer questions and express enthusiasm.
- Provide relocation/transition support if applicable.
- Set a clear deadline for response, with room for negotiation.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **K College extended John an offer, and John accepted, signing a written contract in a timely manner.**

Step 9: Ensure Compliance & Non-Discrimination

- HR monitors each step for legal compliance (EEOC, ADA, FMLA, Title IX, etc.).
- All decision-makers complete annual anti-bias and legal training.
- Maintain records of hiring steps and decisions for audit purposes.
- Safeguard protected information and protect your candidate's privacy. Information shared with third parties should meet the legal compliance threshold and should be the minimum necessary to achieve its intended purpose.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☒ No ☐ Unknown ☐

- **All legal and HR requirements for hire are assumed to have been met, however a detailed breakdown of legal and HR team activities is not included within the case. This suggests that enhanced transparency between HR, Legal, and the hiring manager would be beneficial.**

Step 10: Evaluate & Improve the Process

- Solicit anonymous feedback from candidates and committee members.
- Track time-to-hire, offer acceptance rate, and diversity metrics.

- Adjust process based on data and feedback.

Was this step followed in the case of K College? Yes ☐ No ☒ Unknown ☐

- **There is no reference within the case to K College or Steve soliciting additional feedback from either the candidate or the committee members following John's announcement that he was disavowing his contract. There is no evidence that metrics on the candidate pool were taken into account during the hiring process. It is unknown if K College will adjust their processes based on John's actions.**

2. Evaluate if there was a psychological contract between K. College and John? What happened to that contract?

The psychological contract, first introduced by Argyris (1960) and later expanded by Rousseau (1989) and Rousseau (1995), refers to the unwritten expectations and beliefs of employees and employers regarding their mutual obligations. This paradigm has been extensively examined in both the human resource management and organizational behavior literature in all sizes and types of firms (Conway & Briner, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Lauilié & Tekleab, 2016; Robinson & Wolfe Morrison, 2000; Rousseau, 1989, 1995; Tekleab et al., 2020). Thus far, the focus has been on how these contracts are formed, particularly regarding the timing and conditions that lead to the establishment of such agreements. Furthermore, because small business owner-managers are perceived as leaders within their businesses, research has found that their conscientiousness and openness to experience directly influence a balanced approach to employee contracts (Ntalianis & Dyer, 2021).

Contracts often fail to meet employees' frequently unmet expectations, thus pointing to employers as a source of discontent and a reason for breaking the contract. This focus on employees has been further exacerbated during The Great Resignation and quiet quitting (Formica & Sfodera, 2022), including not showing up on the first day of work after being selected by an employer. The most common causes of the recent great resignation are centered around failure to recognize performance, feeling disrespected at work, a toxic organizational culture, and seeking a different professional fulfillment. The industries most impacted by this have been the hotel and service industries, which are often categorized as transactional types of relationships (pay for work). This is especially true for small businesses or owner-operator type of firms. That being said, this case does not currently point to such factors since John has not yet started working there. Good students should quickly point out that academic employment is not pay-for-work but rather a relationship-based contract where professors are hired for life (thus the value of getting tenured).

A psychological contract encompasses the unspoken, informal understanding between an employer and an employee concerning their mutual expectations and obligations.

According to Rousseau (1989), this understanding is crucial for maintaining positive relationships between the organization and its employees. Unlike formal employment contracts, psychological contracts involve implicit beliefs and built perceptions that influence the employer-employee relationship through both onboarding and organizational signaling. K College followed a hiring process aimed at building a contract based on mutual expectations and obligations.

Establishing this reciprocal exchange typically begins before formal employment, during recruitment communications, and is further shaped during the onboarding process. Rousseau (1989) argues that an individual's belief system regarding these expectations is formed early in the employment relationship, well before formal employment is established. During the recruitment and selection process, the psychological contract is initiated through the job advertisements, communication during the screening process, the displayed behaviors by the recruiting team during an on-site interview, and other organizational messaging well before an offer is made, which, according to both Rousseau (1995) and Cable and Judge (1994) contribute to shaping applicants' expectations of the employer. (Tekleab et al., 2020) also found that communication and interactions before hiring play a crucial role in shaping the initial psychological contract, pointing to informal interactions that significantly influence how applicants perceive the organization's culture and expectations as a foundation of that contract.

The recruitment process and onboarding process described in the case demonstrate a systematic and robust exchange between John and K College/Steve, and as a strong foundation for establishing a psychological contract. So, what went wrong? What could have been done differently? This case underscores the significance of the onboarding period and its pivotal role in establishing the psychological contract. Morrison and Robinson (1997) argued that employees interpret organizational cues and refine their beliefs about mutual obligations during this time. Research by De Vos et al. (2003) highlights that psychological contracts evolve during organizational socialization, particularly as employees gauge initial expectations with actual experiences. In this case, students can see that Steve attempted to set work expectations by engaging John through socialization (follow-up, engagement). Millennial and Gen Z students might point out that John had, in fact, inquired about possible accommodations for his remote location and might be quick to point out that Steve and K College should "simply" make such an accommodation if they wanted him so badly. They might admit their personal bias or preference for job mobility and learning opportunities over job stability and low commitment to their employers, which, according to Lyons and Kuron (2014), is the source of shorter tenure by younger workers in organizations. Twenge (2010) points out that Millennials and Generation Z, who now dominate the workforce, value personal growth, meaningful work, and work-life balance more than long-term employment with a single company, posing challenges for managers seeking to employ and keep them. It is essential to remind

the students of the cost of hiring people, including onboarding, before an employee reaches their peak productivity (i.e., ROI).

It is essential to note from the case that the offer made had clear expectations about onsite presence as an important part of what K College offers its students. Steve, the department chair's, actions and communications during employment negotiation were key to formal and informal contract formation and form the beginning of beliefs consistent with Conway and Briner (2005), suggesting that those often serve as a proxy for the organization's expectations. Was something missed? Did Steve miss important signals? Signaling theory, introduced by Spence (1978), has been applied to psychological contract research to explain how employers send signals that employees interpret as indicators of promised obligations. Rousseau (2001) points out that both explicit (e.g., contractual terms) and implicit signals (e.g., flexibility) can contribute to the psychological contract, even before the employee formally accepts the offer. A mismatch between stated expectations and actual practices can lead to early perceptions of a contract breach, which can significantly impact the psychological contract. Morrison and Robinson (1997) found that the severity of the breach depends on whether it is perceived as an intentional breach (reneging) or a misunderstanding or misalignment of expectations. Research by Rousseau (1995) found that when employees perceive their employer has failed to fulfill promises regarding job security, career growth, or work-life balance, they are more likely to quit. The perceived work-life balance misalignment may have contributed to a mismatch, which is often raised as an issue by students reading this case. Guest (2004) found that signaling mismatches usually precede breaches, emphasizing that anything that facilitates mutual expectations is key to avoiding misunderstandings, especially in small businesses.

The case suggests that Steve sent all the necessary signals to John, including coordinating book ordering and sharing moving-related information. Students are often quick to point to the failure of K. College for being inflexible in the first place (when he asked to come to work only a few days a week) and thus contributing to the contract breach when, in fact, John is the one who failed to meet his obligations by signaling that he was moving forward with the plan to join the faculty at K. College. He had numerous opportunities to express his discontent. Good students will point to John's intentional breach of contract, which reflects his poor integrity and lack of follow-through on his commitments.

3. In your view, did John demonstrate integrity and follow-through on his commitments?

Even if not legally binding in most states in the US, accepting a job offer should be considered a commitment on both an ethical and psychological level. Of course, the timing of the offers is essential to consider in this case. We currently do not know when he accepted the second offer, as John refused to answer questions from Steve on the subject, but what is clear from the exchange between Steve and John is that John actively pursued continual employment

with his current employer, knowing that he had signed a contract and engaged in a psychological contract. He hinted that he had never disclosed to his employer that he had accepted the offer at K College, implying that he had questionable judgment.

Although this case centers on academia, what is considered acceptable practice for pursuing multiple employment while under contract across various industries? This is why structural elements (i.e., mobility and processes) must be regarded across numerous industries. In fact, Hachen Jr (1992) emphasizes industrial characteristics as a key reason for quitting or upward mobility. In contrast, Rosenfeld (1992) emphasizes the industry's temporal dynamic, including vacancy-driven models, internal labor markets or forces, and labor market segmentation (i.e., specialization).

The technology sector, especially startups, tends to accept dual job offer pursuance more due to the fast pace and uncertainty surrounding long-term employment prospects. Fallick et al. (2006) noted that ethical rigidity is more flexible due to the rapid decision-making process of the industry, where job mobility is high. It appears to mirror the findings from Van den Born and Van Witteloostuijn (2013), who signaled that commitment is more fluid and that employment offer renegotiations can be common in freelance employment contexts. This is because creative industries must deal with overlapping opportunities and offers negotiated without formalized rejections (Menger, 1999).

On the other hand, in sectors such as consulting, health, and academia, job commitment is a matter of professional integrity. In healthcare, the operational consequences and impact on patient care planning can make job commitment a matter of professional integrity (Tekingündüz et al., 2017). In consulting and finance, it would be considered reputationally damaging to sign multiple offers in part due to the possible blacklisting or reporting of candidates who renege on offers (Harris et al., 2003). In higher education, reneging on an offer would be considered inconsistent with professional norms. This is primarily due to the nature of the profession (academia), which is known to stress the importance of integrity (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). This is also because job offers often involve a lengthy hiring cycle (typically 4-6 months, as described in the case), with committee votes frequently driven by final budget approval, which is often influenced by enrollment. In the case of small businesses, research has found that employees are more likely to stay committed to the owners of small local firms (Halbesleben & Tolbert, 2014).

In this case, John showed low integrity by failing to inform Central State University that he had accepted a position. Some students reacted by saying that they would have Steve call John's current employer to report him. Various options exist, including a phone call to the department head, a written note, or a formal notification to the deans and the human resources department. Based on the facts of this case, Steve should refrain from such action unless he receives written permission from the Human Resources department at K College. Students should be cautioned that reporting John to his employer could result in litigation against K College. In conclusion, students should be re-

minded of the importance of personal integrity in establishing their personal reputation and how trust plays a crucial role in fostering respect during employment.

Suggested Student Insights/Engagement

We provide an optional poll designed to help instructors engage students in discussions about ethical dilemmas that reflect real-world issues. This allows students to review the ethical reasoning process and the theories or perspectives that inform their decisions.

Do you think it is *ethical* to accept and sign two job offers, knowing you will later decline one?

☐ Yes ☐ Not Sure ☐ No

Explain the reasoning behind your decision.

Explanations on why, not sure or no for Instructors: Most students would say that in today's world, applicants must protect their interests first. Accepting and signing multiple job offers simultaneously can be a controversial practice that raises questions about professional ethics, which must be put into the context of market norms or expectations. The acceptability of this practice varies significantly by industry or type of business, as discussed in the previous section. The instructor should emphasize the ethical reasoning that might be used to rationalize the student's choice in the above poll. Trevino and Nelson (2021) remind us that ethical action is a function of ethical judgment processes that start with the situation's moral nature, and this applies to multiple settings. It begins with ethical awareness.

Students who answered yes often trace their reasoning to the following perspectives or theories:

- **Utilitarian Perspective:** According to Mill (2016) the morality of an action is based on the greatest good for the greatest number (of people concerned). If accepting both offers temporarily allows the candidate to guarantee better employment and long-term well-being, it may be justified as serving the individual's greater utility or self-serving interest (Friedman, 2007). However, John's decision negatively affects K College and, to some extent, the many students enrolled in the courses this fall, and arguably, John's utility might not supersede that of the larger group affected by his decision. Without intent to deceive beyond the normative expectations of employment negotiations, this act may be seen as a rational choice in an uncertain environment (Stone, 2007). Employees often do not see that they are hired to serve the needs of the firm and or customers, thus fail to realize the impact of poor ethical decisions on a firm's ability to satisfy the customer.
- **Procedural Justice:** In turn, if the job seeker is honest and transparent, they should promptly notify the potential employer once the final employment decision is made; they may be acting ethically under the principles of procedural justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1978). In this case, the timing of the notification is highly questionable, although some students might defend John, pointing out that he did notify the unit manager of his decision.

- **Ethical Egoism:** Facione et al. (1978) define it as the belief that human conduct should be based exclusively on self-interest. The concern for self and only one's own welfare appears central to the contemporary issues faced in silent quitting (Formica & Sfodera, 2022) and cited by students who state that it is appropriate to have ambitions and seek personal interest over the organization's needs.

Unsure students might share their struggle with conflicting principles or values.

Moral Development Theories might explain why individuals struggle in answering this question. According to Kohlberg (1981), individuals move through stages of moral reasoning. The most significant advancement in moral development typically occurs during early childhood—marked by rule-based thinking to more principled ethical reasoning later in life. Although students expressing uncertainty may be in a transitional stage, research has found that adolescents understand the importance of context and intentions and understand the meaning of fairness and social contract well before adulthood. The instructor might elect to force the students to answer yes or no to the above poll to seek a commitment, especially with a generation that has accepted silently quitting (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

- **Ethical Pluralism:** Ethics often involves balancing multiple conflicting principles—duty, consequence, justice, care, personal care/work life balance. This case points to the complexity, which Beauchamp and Childress (1994) say, justifies the need for further dialogue to build autonomy in ethical decisions and carefully consider all sides and alternatives.

Students who answer no are more often considered non-traditional or currently employed, and they would say John is misleading at best or outright unethical when he committed to multiple employers at once. The following frameworks are often mentioned in their justification.

- **Deontological Ethics:** From a Kantian standpoint (Kant, 1785/1993), individuals have a moral duty to uphold promises and commitments, which apply to employment decisions. Accepting a job offer is viewed as a commitment, and breaking such a commitment violates the obligation of honesty.
- **Contractarianism:** As we discussed in the previous question and as argued by Rousseau (1995), when a contract offer is signed, it creates an implicit psychological contract with mutual expectations, including a commitment towards each party built on trust. Social contract theory implies that breaking such a contract can only damage that relationship and the reputation of the entity breaking such a contract.
- **Virtue Ethics:** This decision to renege the contract may reflect negatively on the individual's character, which is a statement of one's disposition (Darwall, 2005). Knowingly misleading an employer compromises traits like honesty, integrity, and reliability, as Triantosky (1990) stated, which are foundational to virtue ethics.

4. What could Steve and/or the university have done differently? You cannot assume you can find someone qualified to fill the position (especially covering four sections).

Steve or the organization should evaluate their processes against the rubric (hiring steps) outlined in Prompt 1. If they find that they can improve upon it or that they neglected some aspects of it, or that it did not comply with HR small business practices, then they should formulate an improvement plan to incorporate for the next hiring process (Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021). Most small businesses like to follow an out-of-the-box approach that mirrors business best practices to improve their chance of being compliant. Improving processes also increases efficiency (cost saving), and can help ensure success. If they find no areas for improvement, then they can consider that an outlier. Occasionally, outliers will exist, as human nature can be random and unpredictable (O'Sullivan & Irby, 2011).

The hiring organization should be mindful of how candidates feel about the process, because the more valued a candidate feels, the more likely they will be to accept a job offer (Gr, 1992).

It is common for hiring managers to overlook the importance of consistent and transparent communication with candidates (Langenkamp et al., 2020). This is especially true at a small college, where the hiring team often has other responsibilities and must juggle the duties of being an employee with the additional work of performing a search. Being part of a hiring board may be a rare experience for the hiring team, which can lead to mistakes due to inexperience. In education, hiring managers need to assess review and promotion processes to see if they can be made more consistent (Bhalla, 2019). This is even more relevant for small businesses, where owner-managers might have to manage time and conflicting priorities.

The university could have standardized and made its hiring practices transparent and fair (Profession, 2011). While evaluating potential process improvement based on the scenario analysis and the detailed procedural steps outlined, several key areas emerge as potential targets for strategic improvement, aimed at bolstering the efficiency, impartiality, and overall efficacy of the university's hiring process (Waterbury, 2010).

After John withdrew from his contract with K College, the dynamics for Steve and the university must shift, as they contemplate their new problem, filling the now urgent vacancy.

Steve should:

- Remain calm and maintain a professional demeanor, resisting the urge to lash out or retaliate, remembering that he cannot at this point influence the outcome of John's choice.
- Try to contact John or have a third party do so- like the HR department, to better understand the situation, understanding that John has no obligation to respond. Ask John what the university could do better.
- If there is a backup candidate or other interviewees who were finalists, reach out to them again to gauge their current interest in the position.
- Ask the existing faculty, as well as the adjunct pool, if they have the capacity to cover the temporary shortfall.
- Consider re-initiating the hiring process.
- Add a note to the HR system, explaining what occurred, using only the facts. This note can be leveraged or referenced should the candidate return to apply for a future job.
- Use all feedback and input to contribute to a system of continuous improvement.

Epilogue

The dean worked with Steve to find a locally based adjunct professor who was looking to transition to academia. Steve met with the person and built an arrangement to allow this individual to join the department to teach operations management courses while pursuing his Ph.D. and, therefore, earning the credentials to qualify for the tenure position within two years. Steve did see John at a professional meeting, and they could hardly make eye contact. This situation at K. College mirrors challenges often faced in small businesses, where a newly hired employee fails to show up on the first day of work, leaving managers questioning the applicant's ethics and professional integrity. In both academic and small business settings, such incidents create immediate operational strain, forcing leaders to seek temporary solutions to maintain productivity. When the vacant role requires individuals with advanced credentials or highly specialized skills, as is common in both academia and niche business sectors, the competition for qualified talent becomes fierce. This highlights how ethical behavior, reliability, and accountability are not only essential to personal professionalism but also crucial to organizational resilience and long-term success.

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Appendix A - Hiring Process Review

Step 1: Develop & Approve the Job Requisition

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 2: Post the Job Accurately & Widely

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 3: Screen Applications Promptly & Fairly

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 4: Verify Candidate Credentials

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 5: Schedule Interviews with Stakeholders

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 6: Use a Standardized, Impartial Scoring Rubric

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 7: Maintain Clear & Consistent Candidate Communication

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 8: Extend Offer & Ensure Acceptance

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 9: Ensure Compliance & Non-Discrimination

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments:

Step 10: Evaluate & Improve the Process

Was this step followed in the case of K College? ☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Unknown
Comments: