

Confidentiality in Hiring and Firing

Professor Joe Eager is a faculty member in the Entomology Department at Massive State University. Due to a large endowment from an alumnus—now the CEO of a major biotechnology company—the department has been conducting a search to fill a new senior faculty line and Prof. Eager is on the search committee. One of the leading candidates, Dr. Julia Big, has built a solid body of innovative research and has an impressive history of obtaining large grants from a variety of external funding sources. Prof. Eager is keenly aware that hiring Dr. Big would cement MSU’s reputation as the leader in the field and he has been aggressively championing her application.

Miguel Young was Prof. Eager’s first advisee at MSU and is now in his last year of a post-doctoral fellowship at Research University—Dr. Big’s institution. At a conference, Dr. Eager and Miguel get together to chat about his progress and especially about Miguel’s on-going job search.

“So, any word?” Prof. Eager asked, as they sat down at a small coffee shop around the corner from the conference hotel.

“I actually have some great news,” Miguel replied. “I have two tenure-track offers—one from East Coast University and one from Research U!”

“Wow! That’s fantastic! Have you decided which one you are going to take?”

“I’m not sure, but I have until the end of the month to decide. East Coast would be really great. Their offer is very generous, and the school is in an exciting city that is only a quick train ride away from my family. But on the other hand, Research U has the stronger department and a very collegial atmosphere—both in large part due to Dr. Big. She has really taken me under her wing in the last couple of years. I think I could learn a lot from her if I stayed at Research U.”

“I think that there’s something you need to know,” Prof. Eager cut in. “There’s a very good chance that Julia Big won’t be at Research U for much longer. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but between you and me, she’s at the top of the shortlist for the new endowed chair we’ve been trying to fill. One of the other members of the search committee is resisting pretty hard—I’m sure you could guess who—but it’s clear that he just has some petty axe to grind. He has disliked her for years. I’m sure that the rest of the department is going to jump on the opportunity at the next faculty meeting in a couple of weeks. She is pretty much a lock; and if we offer her the position, I don’t really see how she could turn it down.”

“Oh, my ... thanks for the heads-up!” Miguel exclaimed. “I didn’t really consider her taking off—she’s been at Research U so long that I didn’t realize that she was thinking about going somewhere else. That just made my choice a lot easier. Research U is great and all, but if Dr. Big isn’t going to be there, I think I would be much better off at East Coast.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. What responsibilities does Professor Eager have to Miguel Young in this case? To the other members of the search committee? To the department/university? To Dr. Big? Do you think that he lived up to these responsibilities? Why or why not? Were there any better options available to him?
2. Why is confidentiality in hiring and firing important?
3. When, if ever, is it appropriate to discuss decisions to hire or fire someone before the decision is finalized?
4. What kind of information regarding the hiring or firing of someone is it (in)appropriate to disclose to a third party? Why?