

# Hiring a Researcher on Contract

What every non-profit should know by **Marion Terry**

**When the members of a non-profit organization apply for funding to do research, they embark on a very exciting and equally challenging journey.**

The voyage begins with an imaginative inquiry into what could—and should—be done within their own and other adult literacy settings, continues through various phases of implementation, and ends with reflection on the research process and results. When the research is funded by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), the initial application and reporting guidelines are very clearly set out. Both NLS and the researching organization know exactly what will be done, and how and why, long before any money changes hands. The next challenge is hiring a researcher who will stay true to the initial intent of the project while executing the proposed research design, and who will fulfil reporting assignments with close attention to detail. The following recommendations for recruiting, interviewing, hiring, monitoring, and rewarding a researcher are based on this author's 15 years of experience as a member of various non-profit organizations that have hired researchers to execute externally funded research studies.

## Recruiting

First, set up a hiring committee. If your organization is very small, this committee will likely consist of its executive members. A larger organization may have other members who are familiar with academic research and who should be included in the selection process. Then, try to recruit a researcher through informal means. If you are not new to the researching arena, you may already know a number of people to whom you would feel comfortable entrusting your current project. Prioritize your list and then approach each of these individuals in order, outlining your researching needs and asking if they would like to do the work. If you do not already know of any appropriate researchers, try contacting other organizations that have done similar projects, in order to solicit recommendations for potential researchers. Be sure to ask questions pertaining to each researcher's interpersonal relations with the organization's members, in addition to inquiring about the quality and quantity of the work accomplished.

If these informal means do not yield a researcher appropriate to your needs, you will have to take a more formal route, for example by applying to university outreach programs and/or advertising in

local newspapers. University outreach programs are an excellent way to recruit researchers who have a vested interest in achieving success that can be recorded on their curriculum vitae. When the outreach program is based on a senior student researcher model, you have the benefit of having an experienced professor supervise the researcher and help him/her to complete the work. Newspaper advertisements are another way to attract researchers of whom you have no prior knowledge. You can save money by posting a small ad with a contact number for further information about the project. Newspaper ads give you the luxury of perusing applications as a committee, comparing individuals as you shortlist them.

## Interviewing

Regardless of the recruitment means, every applicant should be required to submit a formal application, including a résumé and list of references. Set at least one formal interview at which all hiring committee members will be present—even if you have only one applicant in whom you are interested. The application and interview help to establish a formal employer-employee relationship, while acquainting all parties who will be involved in the project with each other. The interview also gives you an opportunity to ask questions about applicants' research interests and experiences, while assessing their interpersonal skills. You need to be satisfied not only that the successful applicant will satisfactorily perform the required tasks, but also that he/she will be interpersonally compatible with your research participants and with whichever organization members will be supervising the work.

In an informal recruiting process, you have the advantage of soliciting evaluative feedback about potential researchers, from whomever you wish. In a formal recruiting process, however, you are restricted to contacting only those individuals named on the applicant's reference list. Furthermore, regardless of your means of recruitment, once you have asked an applicant for a résumé and list of references, you are restricted to that list. Ask applicants for permission to contact previous research supervisors/employers not already listed, and carefully check all references. Remember that just recording past researching jobs does not necessarily mean that these jobs were done well. You need to find out all that you can in order

to make an informed decision in hiring the best researcher available for your study.

If any potential researcher indicates a desire to use your project for a dual purpose, such as a pilot study for his/her master's or PhD research—or for the master's thesis or doctoral dissertation itself—think very carefully before you agree. Master's and PhD students have their own research agenda, and this agenda will prevail when their university research needs conflict with yours. If you do permit your study to be used for another purpose, you need to set very clear criteria—in writing and signed by both parties—about the conditions for this dual use, including ownership of the data, analyses, and final reports.

## Hiring

Once you have selected a researcher, you must seal the agreement in writing. Draw up a clear employment contract with the aid of a lawyer, and include the lawyer's consultation fee in your original funding proposal. You are legally bound by the agreement that you as employer, and your researcher as employee, sign, so you cannot afford to make any errors or omissions. Make sure that this agreement includes clear criteria for salary payouts contingent upon completion of the work to your satisfaction, and a cancellation clause. If you wish to prepare a separate Statement of Work detailing the research tasks that will be remunerated, and/or a separate Data Release Agreement explaining the conditions for dual use in master's or doctoral work, then the document(s) should be prepared with the aid of your lawyer, be clearly referenced in the employment contract, and be duly signed and dated by both parties. . If you wish to deviate from these agreements in any way at any time during the project, seek legal advice before drawing up an official Letter of Agreement that is signed in the same way as the original contract.

## Monitoring

Assign an organization member, preferably someone from the selection committee, to supervise the project and monitor the researcher's work in accordance with the signed employment contract and any corollary agreements. Request regular research reports, due at the end of each payment period. Plan for at least a one-week delay in payment for work done, so that the supervisor will have time to review the researcher's report (and any supporting materials), and consult with the researcher and other organization members if necessary, before the cheque is issued. This process ensures that the work is indeed being done well, and provides opportunity for negotiating any necessary changes.

If things start to go wrong, seek legal advice

immediately! The counsel of well-meaning friends and colleagues, or experienced university professionals, is not enough. You have entered a legal contract, and contractual law will prevail over any dispute. That is why the cancellation clause is so important to your initial employment contract. Without that clause, your only recourse is to let the contract run its course, paying the researcher whether or not he/she performs the work (let alone performs it to your satisfaction), and then sue the researcher for breach of contract if you wish—which will probably cost you more in legal fees than the original payout.

## Rewarding

An employment contract should dictate monetary rewards for work well done, according to a schedule that coincides with various stages and sub-stages of the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes. In addition to making interim payments contingent upon receiving satisfactory interim reports, a significantly higher amount should be assigned to the final report as a final salary payout. Some organizations prefer to withhold all remuneration until the end of the contract. This all-or-nothing system of payment is appropriate for short-term contracts, but research projects of longer duration warrant more frequent rewards for progressive completion of assigned tasks—and a bigger payout at the end to endorse the final product. Progressive payments also serve as checks and balances to ensure successful research outcomes.

Non-monetary rewards are also important. Regular contact initiated by the project supervisor, by telephone and/or in person, tells the researcher that his/her work is important. Positive feedback to the researcher's interim reports further confirms that he/she is valued by the organization and that its members are paying attention to the research process. In addition, the researcher should be included in any celebration that is held to mark the end of the project.

## Conclusion

The ultimate success of an externally funded research study depends on how well the project is planned ahead of time, executed by the researcher, and reported after-the-fact to the funding agency and to the field. The key player in this process is the researcher on whom the

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researching organization depends to gather, analyze and report data. It therefore behooves the members of non-profit organizations to consider very carefully what personal and professional attributes will best position this researcher to meet their needs—and then to put safeguards in place that will give both the organization and the researcher room to make changes, including contract termination, should the researching process not proceed as planned or should the two parties encounter irreconcilable differences. It is equally important to put a system of rewards in place that will validate the researcher and encourage him/her to do the best job possible. ■