

Case description

You are John Taylor, head of a cross-functional team at Brightfield University's Research Center, a mid-sized academic institute focused on engineering and applied sciences. The center is expanding its research portfolio to include interdisciplinary projects with industry partners, and you need to hire a Program Manager to coordinate multiple strategic research initiatives across departments and ensure their successful delivery.

The Program Manager will:

- Oversee and coordinate multi-department research projects
- Track and manage project timelines, budgets, and grant compliance
- Engage and manage external collaborators and industry partners
- Ensure adherence to research standards and institutional regulations
- Regularly report progress to the center's leadership and funding bodies

Decision Task

You will review three shortlisted candidates for the Program Manager role. Based on their profiles, select the candidate you believe is the best fit. Provide a brief (1–3 sentence) justification for your choice.

The challenge is that the hiring budget is limited, and each candidate brings different strengths, areas for development, and compensation expectations. The decision must consider:

- Stakeholder goals (faculty, research staff, administration, funding agencies)
- Gains each candidate can contribute
- Pains (potential challenges or limitations)
- Resources required (salary, training, internal support)

Candidates

Background: 12 years managing research operations and laboratory programs at two mid-sized universities; led multiple grant-funded projects and equipment modernization initiatives.

Education: Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering; Lean Six Sigma Black Belt.

Strengths: Deep technical expertise in lab operations, experimental protocols, and quality assurance; strong experience in managing research vendors and equipment contracts.

Development Areas: Primarily focused on operational management; less experience in interdisciplinary collaborations or experimental program design; tends to rely on established methods.

Salary Expectation: €3,000/month (negotiable with performance-based bonus)

Maria Costa



Background: 7 years managing research administration and project coordination at a large university; coordinated efforts between faculty, administrative staff, and industry collaborators.

Education: M.A. in Research Management; PMP certification.

Strengths: Strong stakeholder management, excellent communication, experienced at bridging faculty and administrative teams; adaptable to changing research priorities.

Development Areas: Moderate technical knowledge in specific research domains; limited experience with large-scale lab equipment and compliance audits; will require targeted training in specialized lab protocols.

Salary Expectation: €2,400/month + modest bonus tied to project milestones.

Daniel Kurt



Background: 4 years as a research coordinator in an engineering lab and a startup incubator; led pilot projects in lab automation and data tracking for experiments.

Education: M.Sc. in Project Management; strong data analysis skills (Python, R).

Strengths: Highly adaptable, skilled at using data to optimize lab processes, creative problem solver; comfortable introducing new research technology and tools.

Development Areas: Limited experience managing large interdisciplinary research teams or handling complex industry partnerships; will require mentoring initially.

Salary Expectation: €1,750/month, with growth linked to performance reviews

Aisha Khan

