How to Hire the Staff Your Mission Deserves

By

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As the economy continues to rebound from the recent recession, hiring—not downsizing—is the name of the game in nonprofit HR. For leaders that have been in the difficult position of managing layoffs and coping with increased work demands due to vacancies, the availability of funds for new personnel is a welcome development. But with the enthusiasm to “staff up” to restore staffing levels to what a mission needs, there is a commensurate risk of committing costly mistakes. Screening—separating the “want to work here” from the very best candidates for open positions—is the key to hiring the caliber of staff your mission deserves.

What could go wrong?

Not every applicant is suited for the vacant role posted on your website and on job boards. Ineffective screening can lead to:

1. **Poor performance** – Hiring an applicant who doesn’t have the experience, skills or know-how needed to succeed.
2. **Culture clash** – Bringing a new team member on board whose attitude, behavior or style clashes with the culture of the organization. (To learn more about managing the risk of culture clash, see the article by Melanie Herman and Alexandra Ricketts beginning on page 1).
3. **Danger zone** – Introducing a new hire with characteristics or a past history that put your clientele, staff, financial assets or reputation at undue risk.

The risks of inadequate screening are exacerbated when:

- You need to fill a position… yesterday
- You need to fill a position with unusually technical or other rare skills
- Your nonprofit can’t afford competitive compensation and benefits
- The applicant pool is small due to your location, job requirements or other reasons

Screening Trends: What’s New?

Screening prospective staff has become routine for most nonprofits. Yet despite its familiarity, it’s never safe to screen on autopilot. Consider following new developments as you re-tool, update or revamp your screening process to increase its effectiveness.

Ban the Box: A growing number of employers have removed from the application the question that has been asked for decades: “Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” The primary reason for the shift is due to “ban the box” legislation that prohibits employers from asking that question on an employment application. Why?

Research suggests that employers are very unlikely to give an applicant who answers "yes" any further consideration. And this is true even in cases where a criminal history has not been identified as a disqualifying characteristic. According to the National Employment Law Project, more than 50 cities and counties and 10 states have adopted laws requiring that public employers wait to ask about criminal convictions until a later stage in the hiring process. States with ban-the- box laws applicable to private employers are: Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Rhode Island. EEOC Enforcement Guidance issued in 2013 includes the following "best practice" recommendations for employers who use criminal history information when making employment decisions:

- Eliminate policies or practices that exclude people from employment based on any criminal record*
- Train managers, hiring officials, and decision-makers about Title VII and its prohibition on employment discrimination
- Develop a narrowly tailored written policy and procedure for screening applicants and employees for criminal conduct

Social Media Site Surfing: At a recent presentation by our CEO, Melanie Herman, more than half of the attendees acknowledged surfing the Web to find information on applicants. The motivation to surf is a valid one: to identify prospective staff whose lack of maturity or good judgment would disqualify them for paid positions. While that sounds good, did you know that surfing the Web for "dirt" on applicants can be risky? The principal risk lies in the potential to learn something about an applicant that an employer isn't legally permitted to consider when making a hiring decision, such as:

- **Medical conditions or disabilities**. Remember that an applicant who is qualified to perform the essential functions of the job is protected from discrimination in screening.
- **Age**. While you can be picky about experience levels for certain positions, unless your nonprofit falls under the federal or state size thresholds, you cannot discriminate against a potential employee solely because they are 40 years of age or older. See the article titled "My Generation" for additional information on age discrimination.
- **Personal preferences or beliefs**. Unless you are a church or religious nonprofit permitted to discriminate against those outside your faith, religious beliefs should have no impact on a hiring decision.

Ongoing Screening: A growing number of nonprofit employers are adopting policies that require rescreening during an employee's tenure. Re-screening sends the important message that your eligibility or disqualifying criteria apply to current, as well as prospective staff. In an article that originally appeared in the publication eVolunteerism, Consultant Linda Graf wrote:

"Once a candidate has been screened, accepted, and placed, the organization continues to have a duty to ensure that he or she performs satisfactorily in his or her assigned position. Potentially harmful candidates can slip through even the most comprehensive screening protocols, and initially superb candidates can decline in capacity or develop ill intent at any point after their acceptance into a position. Simply put, it is nothing short of dangerous to assume that risks end when a candidate has been screened, even when the screening has been rigorous." Source: "It's Never Over: Ongoing Screening of Volunteers and Paid Staff," by Linda Graf

One of the downside risks of ongoing screening, however, is creating a culture of mistrust. Consider the following tips when re-screening to ensure that you aren't doing more harm than good:

- **Be transparent**. Be honest and open with employees on why and how re-screening is part of your safety program. Trusted and valued staff have the right to know what you are looking for. Make certain your disqualifying criteria are clear and applied consistently. Since current staff may not recall the details of your screening process and policies, provide a refresher and consider asking staff to sign a new consent form.
- **Be consistent**. The mission and programs of your organizations will help you determine how often to re-screen. Groups who serve vulnerable populations, such as children, may want to re-screen more frequently, such as every two years, while other organizations may be able to re-screen every three to five years. Make certain that individuals in the same or similar roles are subject to the same rescreening process.
- **Stay focused**. As described in this section, re-screening refers to conducting a recheck of criminal history and driving records rather than a complete re-screening. Performance issues should be addressed as part of the routine supervision and staff evaluation process. Organizational policies should also require staff members to inform supervisors of any incidents that could impact the organization.

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Auditions, Tryouts and Trial Work Periods: A growing number of organizations are placing less emphasis on resume sorting and interviews, and instead using a structured trial period to determine which prospects best fit the organization's culture and the requirements of a particular job. In his HBR Blog titled "Hire by Auditions, Not Resumes," Matt Mullenweg, CEO of Automattic, writes that, "trials don't just help us better determine who will succeed at Automattic; they help potential employees avoid big problems down the road." His company pays potential candidates on an hourly basis for 10-20 hours per week over an eight week period. These staff are assigned tasks related to the jobs they are seeking and are given specific feedback along the way. The trial work period enables managers to experience a prospect's work ethic and style, as well as their ability to get up to speed quickly. Your organization will need to customize the process to best fit your mission and culture, but a tryout is a great way to really see the potential of an applicant. Keep in mind that a shortterm trial period will work best when you are considering an employee who is currently out of work, or an applicant returning to the workforce after a period of retirement or time off. Applicants with full-time positions may be unable to accept a trial work period at the risk of losing their current position. In those cases it may be possible to assign a task or project the applicant can complete during their non-work hours that enables you to evaluate the applicant's suitability. **Source**: "Hire by Auditions, Not Resumes," HBR Blog Network, January 7, 2014.

Practical Screening Risk Tips

So in addition to considering screening trends, what specific steps or approaches will help you minimize the danger while maximizing the opportunity for a perfect fit? As in other areas, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Consider the tips described below to fortify staff screening in your nonprofit.

- **Don't believe everything you read**. There are conflicting statistics about the percentage of applicants who lie on a resume, but according to an infographic created by gradschoolhub.com, nearly 40% of applicants lie on their resumes, and a whopping 78% have resumes with misleading information on them. So how can an employer manage the risk of being bamboozled?
- **Verify anything on the resume that is a requirement for the position**. Although it's hard to believe, lying about receiving a college degree is relatively common. If the open position requires an undergraduate or graduate degree, call the granting institution to confirm the applicant indeed graduated
- **Confirm titles, dates of employment and the actual description of the position with prior employers**. Reference checks remain a vital screening tool. They are uniquely valuable because they provide an opportunity to learn about the candidate from someone other than the candidate. To verify the applicant's description of their former job, ask the former employer: "May I read the description of the job on the applicant's resume? I'm interested in hearing if the applicant's description is an accurate summary of the role she held at your organization."
- **Consider using an application, in lieu of, or in addition to accepting a resume**. An application requires the applicant to answer your questions and provide information you want and need to know to complete the screening process. A resume contains information the applicant wants you to know. There is a subtle, but important difference.
- **Never make exceptions to your screening protocols**. Ask any manager who has made a disastrous hiring decision, and you're likely to hear how the candidate's charm or perfect fit for the job led the hiring manager to skip a step. This rule is especially important when hiring someone you know, such as a friend, acquaintance, former associate, friend of a friend, etc. Never cut corners or skip steps because you are in desperate need for help. Your mission deserves more than careless or spotty screening.
- **Double down on reference checks**. Former Center staff member John C. Patterson, the author of our forthcoming "Staff Screening Notebook" reminded us recently that reference checks are a nonprofit's "most important and never to be skipped screening tool." John advises nonprofit leaders to make certain that they complete all of the steps in the screening process for finalists, including checking professional or personal references. Failure to check references will nearly always be an issue in litigation against the organization alleging misconduct on the part of a staff member. It's also important to qualify references to ensure that each reference has a basis for making authoritative observations concerning the applicant's abilities to perform the duties and responsibilities of the position for which they are being considered.
- **Be aware of the confirmation bias when conducting interviews**. Interviews are a great way to begin the process of getting to know an applicant. But research suggests that most interviewers decide whether the applicant is a perfect fit during the first 30 seconds of the interview. Interviewers spend the remaining time with the candidate listening for information that confirms their first impression. This tendency is an example of the confirmation bias. To guard against it, remind yourself before the interview that it's probably better to focus on information that counters your first impression. If your first impression is favorable, look and listen carefully for statements that suggest the candidate might not be the best fit for your culture and requirements. If the first impression is negative, look and listen for

information that might contradict the first impression. And make certain to ask open-ended questions, ask finalists for the same position the same questions, and don't delve into areas that are irrelevant to the position or might lead the interviewee to reveal personal information that you aren't allowed to consider when making a selection. Bias may be minimized by sharing the interviewing task with other staff members and then comparing notes. Each interviewer can identify strengths and weaknesses with the goal of arriving at a consensus.

- **Remember your mission**. The most important reminder in an effective screening process is to remain focused on the skills, abilities and traits you need in the position. Some information you find may not be great, but what is relevant and matters to the position? Does she have the skills and experience that the position requires? Is he someone who will be truly motivated to help fulfill your mission? And of course, always look for positive information that shows the person would be a great fit at your organization, not just the negative! Finally, when selecting staff members remember to think strategically beyond your immediate needs and consider the evolving, future needs and vision for the organization. Remember to ask: is this applicant likely to contribute to the strategic vision of the organization?

Melanie Herman is Executive Director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback and questions about the topic of staff screening at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or (703) 777-3504.

Resources

"Hire by Auditions, Not Resumes," by Matt Mullenweg, featured on the HBR Blog Network, http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/01/hire-by-auditions-not-resumes/

"It's Never Over: Ongoing Screening of Volunteers and Paid Staff," by Lindra Graff, from Linda Graff and Associates, Inc., www.volunteermbc. org/sites/default/fil es/pdfs/It's- Never-Over-Ongoing-Screening-of-Volunteers-and-Paid-Staff.pdf

"More Hiring Tips for Nonprofits: Screening," from the Hiring Tips & Strategies forum by The NonProfit Times, www.thenonprofittimes. com/jobs/more-hiring-tips-fornonprofits- screening/

"6 Tips for Screening Prospective Volunteers," from the Management Tips forum by The NonProfit Times, www.thenonprofittimes. com/management-tips/6-tips-forscreening- prospective-volunteers/

"Ten Tips on Screening Resumes," by John Vlastelica, featured in the Tools for Better Hiring on Dice.com, http://resources.dice.com/report/ tips-screening-resumes/