

## Staff Screening and The Voice



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**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** HR Risk and Employment Practices

A popular reality TV program that has recently caught my attention is “The Voice.” The show features competing singers like “American Idol.” The quirky thing about “The Voice” is that when evaluating the potential of a contestant, the four judges turn their backs to the stage. Each judge hits a giant buzzer if they like what they hear, and want the performer to remain on the show. It’s hard not to be influenced by a singer’s appearance, yet I agree with the premise of the show that success as a vocalist shouldn’t be limited to singers with rock star looks. “The Voice” eliminates the appearance bias, forcing judges to select contestants based on talent alone.

As I watched a recent episode, I began thinking of the traditional funnel-based screening process. Most nonprofit employers begin by broadcasting an advertisement to a large audience. Applicants whose credentials make them “look good” are invited to visit for an interview. Upon meeting an applicant, interviewers decide subconsciously within one minute whether the person is a good fit for the job. Most interviewers spend the remaining time seeking evidence that affirms their initial judgment of “perfect fit” or “not a good fit.” After the interview, reference checks and criminal history background checks are often delegated to another hiring manager or vendor.

This approach to screening has been around as long as sliced bread. A huge risk in this approach is that it feels objective and in many cases, it *isn’t* objective or effective. Why? While watching “The Voice,” it occurred to me that the old-fashioned approach to screening is ineffective because hiring managers and interviewers are quick to judge based on an interviewee’s appearance or the ‘appearance’ of their experience.

To reduce the risk of a mis-hire, let’s apply “The Voice” Method to the screening of prospective nonprofit staff. Here’s one way to do that.

1. Create a position description that truly reflects the needs in your nonprofit.
2. Invite potential applicants to “apply” by submitting something you can use to objectively evaluate proficiency of a skill required by the position. For example, applicants for a position requiring excellent communications skills could be asked to submit an original writing sample. Inserting a skill test at this phase will lead to self-screening: job seekers who customarily forward generic resumes or sloppily complete applications may not bother to apply! Instead of tackling a huge funnel of applicants, consuming time and causing frustration, you’ll review submissions from a smaller, more suitable group.
3. Decide which applications warrant the next screening step: reference checking. Ask candidates who

- demonstrated relevant skills to submit three references who can speak to their suitability for the advertised position. Keep in mind that references should have something to say about how well the applicant performs the skills the organization is seeking—not just that the applicant is a likable person and plays well with others. This step adds additional self-screening, and your pool of applicants will diminish.
4. Ask the now small group of applicants to complete a full application for employment.
  5. Now it's time to turn your chair around and meet the applicants whose materials suggest they are best suited for the job.

You may be scratching your head, wondering if I've completely lost touch with reality. Turn screening on its head by asking applicants to do something hard (e.g., preparing evidence of their talents) before doing something easy (completing a two-page application). Well, maybe I've lost it. Or maybe I'm on to something that could make screening more fun and productive.

The Center offers numerous resources on the topic of screening, including tips on navigating the traditional approach with which you might be familiar. You can also stay tuned for an announcement about advance orders for a new screening book we are publishing this summer! In the meantime, use the following resources to fortify your screening process:

Articles:

- [Background Checks, Screening and Your Nonprofit](#)
- [Help Wanted! Screening Challenges for 21st Century Nonprofits](#)
- [How Lifestyle Figures in an Appropriate Mentor Match](#)
- [Survey Sheds Light on Screening Practices of Volunteer Organizations](#)

Webinars:

- [Getting and Giving References Safely and Effectively](#)
- [Planning and Conducting Effective Interviews](#)
- [The Screening Process in a Nutshell: Selecting the Most Suitable Employees for the Job](#)

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