

Help Wanted! Screening Challenges for 21st Century Nonprofits



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Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

Finding the right people for the key roles in your nonprofit is a continuing challenge. Leading an inspired team to achieve a nonprofit's mission doesn't happen until the leader has recruited and retained the team of people that will propel the nonprofit's mission forward. Yet despite the availability of high tech tools, screening effectively and choosing the *most suitable* applicant still feels a bit like watching a Las Vegas croupier spin the roulette wheel and launch the ball on the spinning wheel.

To *reduce* the risk of a poor match and *increase* the chance that your screening process will lead you to hire or enroll the most suitable candidate, consider the following.

Tune In and Tune Up

If your nonprofit's recruitment and screening processes haven't changed during the past 10 years, you're at great risk of making unsuccessful matches. The information superhighway buzzes with activity 24-7. While your applicant pool may appear to be increasingly diverse, everyone shares a common social habit: internet-based communication is the norm, whether through a computer via email or instant messaging, or with a hand-held device such as a cell phone. Diligent nonprofit employers aware of this trend are using it to their own advantage in selecting applicants for paid and volunteer positions.

For example:

- More and more job seekers are turning to www.Idealist.org, or similar web-based job search sites to surf the Internet for interesting jobs and volunteer opportunities. Putting an advertisement in the local paper is no longer sufficient to ensure that your nonprofit is advertising an opening to the most sophisticated and experienced candidates.
- Employers are monitoring social networking sites and finding that some candidates for employment or volunteer positions demonstrate unprofessional judgment about what they post on their own sites. In today's world, screening often starts with a visit to a candidate's MySpace or Facebook profile.
- Using the Internet to search for information about a candidate for a volunteer or paid position may uncover information about potential employees that is useful.
 - But skillful web sleuths must beware. You may view information that reflects the prospective employee's participation in a protected category. To ensure against inadvertent or alleged discrimination, employers need to discuss with supervisors and others involved in the hiring

process the factors that *may not be considered* in the hiring process, such as a candidate's participation in an affinity group for persons in a protected category.

- Social networking sites can also be useful in spreading the word that a position is available. Many employers are creating or participating in social networking affinity groups online where they can keep in contact with former interns, employees and volunteers. This "alumni" group may be a good source for referrals for new hires. Send the word out via the social networking site that a position is available. Those who have worked at your organization in the past know what it takes to be successful at the organization, and may be in the best position to steer qualified candidates your way.

Carefully Define Expectations

Too often an employee is hired who seems perfect for the job, but after only a short time, significant challenges are evident in the employee's ability to perform. This dilemma is often due to a mismatch of expectations: what the employer expects from the employee may not be adequately expressed up-front or communicated in the early days post-hire. Alternatively, the employee's prior background and experience may not be as robust as it appeared during the hiring process.

Consider the following strategies for improving the odds that your next recruit will be eligible for your "volunteer of the year" award.

- **No Position Description? Do Not Pass Go!** Take the time to draft comprehensive position descriptions. Volunteer positions need descriptions too. List enough of the major responsibilities of the position so that you will have the basis for determining the extent of the screening process that will be required. Is a phone interview sufficient for a one-time-only volunteer post at your weekend 5K run? Maybe. But what is required to screen applicants for the position of CFO?
- **Use an Application for all Positions.** Although an application may seem better suited to larger organizations, they offer innumerable benefits. These benefits include: the opportunity to request answers to the questions you have for applicants, versus relying on what they care to share in a resume; and the valuable truth clause — the statement at the end of the application that asks the applicant to verify the truthfulness of all statements on the application and acknowledge that subsequently discovered misstatements are grounds for immediate dismissal.
- **Heavy Lifting Required? Say So!** When creating a position description, it is critical to ensure that the written description describes the physical requirements of the position as well as the minimum professional and educational qualifications. All position descriptions should include a category of "essential functions" even if you don't think there is anything particularly "physical" about the job. For example, it is a physical requirement of many jobs in the social service area that an employee be able to lift a child who weighs up to 60 pounds or stand for long periods of time. Even jobs that are primarily intellectual require work at a computer station most of the day and should have "the ability to work at a computer station for several hours at a time" listed as an essential function. Having the physical requirements of the job listed on the position description will result in more effective interviews that reveal when and where an accommodation may be required. Identifying essential functions also provides a way for an employer to eliminate a candidate (or terminate an employee) who simply does not meet the qualifications for the position because s/he is unable to perform the essential functions.
- **Don't Give Up on References.** When seeking references, if you are unable to get past the "we don't give references" barrier, ask whether a candidate's former employer would be willing to speak with you if you provide a signed authorization from the candidate granting permission for a reference to be given from the former employer. This technique is effective because it allows former employers to tell you their opinion of the candidate's qualifications for employment with less concern that anything negative that they share will come back to haunt them. See the sidebar on page 5 for an example of a Reference Form.

This fall the Nonprofit Risk Management Center will be offering *QualitySelect*, a new tool that assists employers with the screening and hiring process by helping to manage the elements of the hiring process, from drafting comprehensive position descriptions, to ensuring that all candidates for the same position are screened consistently.

For more guidance on personnel practices and supervision, including a description of state laws that impact the hiring process, consult the Center's popular publication, [Taking the High Road: A Guide to Effective and Legal Employment Practices for Nonprofits](#) 2nd Edition.

Guess Who's Coming to the Workplace?

As if hiring were not enough of a challenge, knowing what some of your employees are up to is another matter. Supervision seems to require eyes in the back of your head. Employees may be engaged in activities while at work that would surprise you. Most leaders have been on the lookout for employees who use the organization's computers and connection to the Internet to visit inappropriate Web sites, but have you considered the cost of employees who blog while at work, and the potential for those blogs to paint an unflattering picture of your nonprofit?

The use of sophisticated databases and software and the introduction of high speed Internet access into nonprofit workplaces bring countless benefits as well as downside risks to employers.

Consider:

- A recent study by Palisade Systems, a network and security company that found that the *biggest risk of data breach or theft* comes from "careless employees or consultants who don't properly secure the data they are entrusted with."
- A survey by www.CareerBuilder.com, reporting that although only 8 percent of workers admitted to stretching the truth on their resumes, nearly half (49 percent) of hiring managers reported they caught a candidate lying on their resume. The most common lies discovered on a resume, according to the survey, include:
 - Embellished responsibilities — 38%
 - Skill set — 18%
 - Dates of employment — 12%
 - Academic degree — 10%
 - Companies worked for — 7%
 - Job title — 5

What are the risks of hiring an unqualified or otherwise ill-suited applicant? The very real and potentially costly risks include:

- The value of time wasted on recruitment, training, screening and separation;
- The risk that an unsuited applicant will take action that will jeopardize the nonprofit's reputation in the community or among key stakeholder groups; and
- The chance that an unskilled worker or volunteer will act negligently and cause physical or other harm to a vulnerable client.

At the Nonprofit Risk Management Center we've been tracking the growing challenges of screening and supervising staff for more than two decades. One of our conclusions is that in our litigious and high tech world, effective screening is more important—and more difficult—than ever. Effective screening requires the careful development of *practical policies and procedures* that can be followed consistently by all personnel involved in staffing and volunteer recruitment. Even when your state-of-the-practice screening policies are followed to a "t", you may still inadvertently hire or recruit someone ill-suited to serve your organization.

Screening is just the first step in ensuring that those you hire for paid positions and recruit for volunteer roles are suited to support your nonprofit's mission, not sabotage it. A thoughtful orientation process that communicates expectations and gets employees engaged with the mission right away is often the next critical step after making the hiring decision. Equally important is the commitment to ongoing, regular performance evaluations. Hiring shouldn't be a gamble. Close supervision and regular feedback, especially in the early stages of an employment relationship, increase the chances that when you roll the dice and make an offer, you'll hit the jackpot.

Sample Reference Form

Part A

(to be completed by the subject of this reference)

Employment reference for: _____

I have stated to [name of prospective employer] that I was employed by you as a [position title]. I request that the following information be furnished by you for reference purposes to this employer, and I consent to your providing this information regarding my past employment, work performance, attendance record, abilities, and reason for my separation from employment. Further, I knowingly waive all rights to bring an action for defamation, invasion of privacy, or similar causes of action, against either [Nonprofit] or you or [name of previous employer] in connection with providing information about my employment with [name of previous employer].

Signature _____

Date _____

Part B

(to be completed by the employer providing a reference for the individual named above)

The person named above was employed as: _____

From: _____

To: _____

According to our records, the above person left the organization for the following reason(s): _____

(circle one) I would would not reemploy this individual.

Please check below the rating that most accurately describes this individual:

	Exceptional	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Work Quality			
Work Quantity			
Cooperation			
Supervision (if applicable)			
Attendance			

Other remarks about the employee's job performance: _____

Were you the employee's supervisor? Yes No

Name _____

Title _____

Company _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Telephone _____