

6. Employing and managing people

6.5 Selecting your candidate

Application forms

Application forms can help the recruitment process by providing necessary and relevant information about the applicant and their skills. The design of the form needs to be realistic and straightforward, appropriate to the level of the job. Using application forms has the following advantages:

- Comparing like with like is easier. CVs can be time-consuming and may not provide the information required.
- They provide the basis for an initial sift, and then for the interview.
- The standard of completion can be a guide to the candidate's suitability, if writing and presentation skills are essential to the job; however, be aware of the possibility of disability discrimination.
- They provide a record of qualifications, abilities and experience as stated by the applicant.

Care also needs to be taken over some less positive aspects of application forms:

- There is a temptation to use application forms to try to extract too much information, e.g. motives, values and personality characteristics. The form should concentrate on the experience, knowledge and competencies needed for the job.
- Some people may dislike filling in forms and so be put off applying for the job. Some very experienced people may find the form inadequate, whilst those with little in the way of qualifications or experience may be intimidated by large empty spaces on the form.
- Application forms add another stage, and therefore more time, to the recruitment process. Some candidates may be lost if they can obtain work elsewhere more quickly.
- Application forms may inadvertently be discriminatory. For instance, to require a form to be filled out 'in your own handwriting', where written English is not relevant to the job, may discriminate against those for whom English is not their first language, or who may not have well-developed literacy skills.

Any information such as title (marital status), ethnic origin or date of birth requested for monitoring purposes (e.g. for compliance with the legal requirements and codes of practice on race, sex, disability and age discrimination) should be clearly shown to be for this purpose only, and should be on a separate sheet or tear-off section. Such information need only be provided on a voluntary basis.

Medical information should also be obtained separately and kept separate from the application form.

Additionally, the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 and subsequent Codes of Practice on recruitment and selection, employment records, monitoring at work and information on workers' health need to be noted - if any recruitment records are to be held on computer or in a manual system, the applicant should be advised of this and for what purposes and duration the information is to be held.

All applications should be promptly acknowledged.

Asylum and Immigration Act 1996

The Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 makes it a criminal offence for an employer to employ those who do not have permission to live or to work in the United Kingdom. For further information contact the Home Office.

Police Act 1997

The Police Act provides a statutory basis for employers to undertake certain criminal record checks on applicants for certain jobs which are exempt under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. Further information can be sought from WCVA's Criminal Records Unit or the Criminal Records Bureau.

Short listing

Whatever form the applications take, there may be a need to sift them before moving on to the interview stage. Such a sift serves to match the applicants as closely as possible to the job and person specification and to produce a shortlist of people to interview.

To avoid any possibility of bias, such sifting should be undertaken by two or more people, and it should involve the direct line manager/supervisor as well as personnel. The sifting stage can also help the organisation by providing feedback on the advertising process and the suitability of the application form. It can also identify people who might be useful elsewhere in the organisation. If references or medicals are to be taken up before the invitation to interview stage, it should be made clear on the application form/information pack sent to the applicant.

Some jobs require medicals to be given at the commencement of employment, and employers may seek preliminary information on a separate medical questionnaire at the time of recruitment. This applies mainly in driving work and industries where there is an exposure to certain chemicals. Any employer who needs advice should contact the Employment Medical Advisory Service (part of the Health and Safety Executive) in their area.

If your organisation believes that pre-employment health screening is necessary, you must make sure it is carried out in a non-discriminatory way: for instance, do not single out disabled people for medical assessment. If a report from any individual's doctor is sought, then permission must be given by the individual, and they have the right to see the report (Access to Medical Reports Act 1988).

The candidates who best match the specifications may then be invited for interview. The invitation letter should tell candidates that they should advise the organisation in advance if any particular arrangements need to be made to accommodate them on arrival or during the interview; for instance, ramp access or lighting levels. The invitation letter should also clearly state whether the organisation will pay the candidate's reasonable travel expenses for the interview.

Who makes the decision?

In some organisations there will be a personnel or human resource specialist who will undertake most of the sifting and shortlisting. It is very important that the line manager/supervisor for the job also be involved, both at the job and person specification stage and at the interview stage. The final selection will thus normally be a joint decision, except in those very small organisations where only a line manager/supervisor or trustee is available to do the recruitment of staff.

Gaining the commitment of the immediate manager/supervisor by involving them in the selection process can be vital to ensuring that the new employee is settled successfully into the organisation. It may be useful both for the candidates to see the environment in which they would be working, and, if they are to be part of a team, for the current team members to meet the candidate.

Selection techniques

There is a variety of methods available to help in the selection process - including interviews, tests (practical or psychometric), assessment centres, role plays and team exercises, to name a few. Usually a range of methods will be used by the organisation depending on the type of job to be filled, the skills of the recruiter and the budget for recruitment.

Interviews

Most jobs are filled through interviews. The interview has two main purposes - to find out if the candidate is suitable for the job, and to give the candidate information about the job and the organisation. Every candidate should be offered the same opportunities to give the best presentation of themselves, to demonstrate their suitability and to ask questions of the interviewer.

A structured interview designed to discover all relevant information and assess the competencies of the applicant is an efficient method of focusing on the match between job and candidate. It also means that there is a consistent form to the interviews, particularly important if there are a number of candidates to be seen.

Unstructured interviews are very poor for recruiting the right person. The structured interview is most likely to be effective in obtaining specific information against a set of clearly defined criteria. However, not every manager is skilled at interviewing, and may not be able to judge efficiently the applicant's skills and competencies. Ideally all interviewers should receive training, including the equal opportunities aspects of recruitment and the relevant legislation.

Interviews need not be formal. The length and style of the interview will relate to the job and the organisation. Some vacancies may call for a formal interview panel, some for a less formal, one-to-one interview. The interviewer(s) should consider the job and the candidates when deciding on the nature of the interview.

All interviews, whether formal or informal, need careful preparation if they are to be successful. Each candidate should leave with a sense of being treated well and fairly and having had the opportunity to give of their best.

Preparing the interview

The interviewer should prepare by:

- Reading the application form, job and person specifications to identify areas which need further exploration or clarification.
- Planning the questions. In some interviews it is appropriate to ask only one or two questions to encourage the candidate to talk at length on certain subjects. In others it may be better to ask a series of short questions on several different areas. If there is more than one interviewer, different people can cover different topics, eg job knowledge, training, qualifications. Do not ask for personal information or views irrelevant to the job. Do not ask potentially discriminatory questions such as 'Are you planning to have children in the next few years?'
- Being ready for the candidates' questions, and trying to anticipate what additional information they may seek.

Conducting the interview

Conduct the interview in an environment that will allow candidates to give of their best. Arrange for there to be no interruptions, divert telephone calls, welcome the candidate(s), and show them cloakroom facilities, etc.

If possible, let the candidate have a brief tour of the place of work. This is particularly useful in the case of people new to the job market (school-leavers, returning men and women), who may have little or no experience of what to expect in a workplace. It may also prove valuable in offering an additional opportunity to assess the candidate's interaction with possible colleagues.

Consider whether any adjustments need to be made to accommodate an interviewee who has indicated a disability on the application form - it is easy to overlook simple adjustments that may be reasonable to make:

- Candidates with hearing impairment may not only need to be able to clearly see the interviewer as they are talking, but may need communication support if they are not to be placed at a disadvantage.
- Is there an alternative to steps for access to the building? Can the interview take place elsewhere, where access might be easier for someone with a physical disability?

It is common that both interviewer and candidate are nervous. Thorough preparation will help both of you. Be careful not to fill silences by talking too much - the aim of the interview is to draw information from the candidate to decide if they would suit the job. The candidate should do most of the talking.

Nevertheless, the interviewer will want to encourage candidates to relax and give of their best in what is, after all, a somewhat unnatural setting. It is important to keep the conversation flowing, and the introductions and initial 'scene-setting' can help all parties settle to the interview.

The following pointers may be helpful in conducting the interview:

- Introduce yourself (and other interviewers if present); this also gives the candidate time to settle down.
- Give some background information about the organisation and the job - this helps everyone to focus on the objective.
- Structure the questions to cover all the relevant areas, and don't ask too many 'closed' questions. Open-ended questions (ie ones that can't be answered just by a yes or no answer) will encourage the candidate to speak freely - they often begin 'what', 'why', 'when' or 'how'.
- Avoid leading questions.
- Listen, and make brief notes as necessary on salient points.
- Have a time frame and keep to it, allowing sufficient time for candidates to ask any questions they might have.
- Make sure the candidate is familiar with the terms and conditions of the job, and they are acceptable. If not, and the candidate is the best one for the job, then some negotiation may be necessary - be careful to avoid inadvertent discrimination.
- Tell the candidate what will happen next and when to expect to hear from the organisation.

Practical tests

If the job involves practical skills, it may be appropriate to test for ability before or at the time of interview. This is generally acceptable for manual and word processing skills, but less useful for clerical and administrative posts. Telephone skills are increasingly in demand, and candidates will almost invariably be asked to undertake a practical test. Any tests must, however, be free of bias and related to the necessary requirements of the job. Consideration in giving any tests must include the objectives of such a test, the efficiency of the method selected, the numbers of candidates (and vacancies), the costs and benefits of such a method.

Making the decision

Decide whom to employ as soon as possible after the interview, test, or assessment. Use of a structured scoring system helps here, particularly one that is based on the applicants' competencies, and helps avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping, making snap judgements, and 'mirror-image' effects (that is, a subconscious subjectivity - looking for similarities to oneself in the candidate). Structured scoring allows the organisation to weight some elements or competencies if desired, and to compare a candidate's score with the job specification 'ideal' score - although care must be taken when considering the results that a high overall score doesn't mask a low score in a crucial area.

Write up notes immediately after the interview - recording relevant answers and detail. This is not only for the decision-making process but also to provide feedback to the candidate if requested. Bear in mind the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998, which will enable the candidate to ask to see interview notes where they form part of a 'set' of information about the candidate - for instance, the application form, references received and so on, or the full personnel file if the candidate is already working for the organisation. Be aware also that your reasons for appointing or not appointing a particular candidate may be challenged under discrimination legislation.

Inform all the applicants of the outcome as soon as possible, whether successful or unsuccessful. Keep in touch if the decision is delayed.

Try to give positive feedback to unsuccessful candidates on any aspects they could reasonably improve for future success. It is sensible to maintain a favourable view of the organisation among the applicants - there may be future job vacancies for which they would be suitable and for which you would wish them to apply. Failure to get one job does not necessarily mean unsuitability for other jobs with the organisation. You may want to keep CVs or applications on file for future matching. Also bear in mind that applicants and their families may be your customers as well as potential employees, so it makes business sense to treat them fairly and courteously.

State on the application form when any references will be sought, and do not approach a current employer unless the candidate has given express permission. If references are sought, they will be most effective if you include a job description with the request, with structured, relevant questions that will enable you to gain accurate further information about the candidate's abilities. Do not ask for personal information or for conjecture about the applicant. Remember too that completing a reference takes time and proper consideration, so only seek such references if you believe they are necessary and appropriate. A simple form confirming dates of employment, capacity and particular skills may be satisfactory.

The holding of particular qualifications, training or licences may be important to the job, and it is reasonable to ask candidates for proof. If checks on such qualifications are to be made, it is good employment practice to make sure the applicant knows, and that copies of any relevant documents will be held on their personnel file.

The timing of reference and qualification checks is variable. It is often the case that references are taken up at shortlist or offer stage, and the candidate may be asked to bring documentary evidence of qualifications to the interview. Job offers are sometimes made 'subject to satisfactory references being received', but this is not advisable. The referee may simply fail to provide any kind of reference. There is no legal requirement to do so. Or a referee may wrongly indicate the applicant is unsuitable, in which case if the offer is withdrawn on those grounds, the organisation could face legal action by the applicant. The organisation needs a policy of what to do in circumstances such as the non-supply of a reference - an initial 'probationary' period might be an acceptable way of proceeding.

Detailed guidance on confidentiality when giving and receiving references may be found in the Employment Records section of the *'Employment Practices Data Protection Code'* available on the website of the Information Commissioner's Office. The Code has guidance on what to do when a worker asks to see his or her own reference. This includes guidelines on what information it is reasonable to withhold if the reference enables a third party (eg the author of the reference) to be identified.

The offer

Once the successful candidate is identified, and any necessary references and checks completed, send out an offer letter. This is preferable to telephoning the candidate, as a letter enables the specifics of the job to be re-stated, with the terms and conditions, any pre-conditions (e.g. subject to exam success), or post-conditions (e.g. subject to a satisfactory probation period).

Remember that the employment contract is a legal one, and exists even before the candidate has commenced employment. The offer letter should set out the following points:

- The job title and the offer of that job.
- Any conditions (pre or post) that apply to the offer.
- The terms of the offer - salary, hours, benefits, pension arrangements, holiday entitlement, place of employment, etc the date of starting, and any probationary period.
- What action the candidate needs to take, e.g. returning a signed acceptance of the offer, agreement to references, any date constraints on acceptance.
- If the letter is to form part of the contract of employment, it should say so. Alternatively it could form the main terms and conditions of employment - a written statement required by law to be issued to employees within two months of them starting work.

Further information

ACAS

Tel: 08457 474747

www.acas.org.uk

Home Office (Asylum)

Tel: 0845 602 1739

www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

Tel: 08701 545500

www.hse.gov.uk

Information Commissioner's Office

Tel: 01625 545745

www.ico.gov.uk

WCVA CRU

Tel: 0800 0197 391

Fax: 01745 357593

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www.wcva-cru.org.uk

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

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