

Making
Better
Selections

Preparation

Introduction

Among the most important decisions a manager or supervisor makes concerns the selection of the new employees. Making the right choice can dramatically improve the functioning of the organization. And the wrong choice can be an exceedingly costly mistake. All too often this important decision gets less consideration than it warrants.

In these times of hiring constraints it is essential that we scrutinize each selection carefully. This booklet contains selections for interviews and improving the quality of selections. Most of what we have to say applies to both external hires and internal placement. We think you can improve your chances of getting the right person by making some of these suggestions standard operating procedures.

While the main topic is interviewing we are also including information on related topics in recruitment.

How To Use This Guide

The guide is obviously lengthy and it may appear as though we are telling you more than you really want to know. You may be tempted to disregard it because you are not authorized to fill any jobs or because you've heard all you want to hear about knowledge, skills and abilities. But don't pass it by completely.

We suggest you at least skim through it, and put it aside as a reference guide for future use. Put it where you will remember it. Go through it more carefully when the need arises. You may want to start a file on interviewing which includes this guide and other related materials you have collected. Make copies of other publications dealing with interviewing, such as magazine articles. Make notes of questions you have used in the past so that you need not reinvent the wheel each time around. The object is to improve your interviewing skills by collecting reference materials, using what suits you best, and building on your experiences.

Know the Qualification Requirements

This may not seem like an important point, but it bears mentioning. You should be familiar with the qualification standards, as described in OPM Handbook X118, for the position you are filling, in order to avoid interviewing and considering applicants who are not eligible for selection. This situation can arise when you are doing your own external recruitment and when using civil service certificates. Even though OPM reviews the qualifications of those on registers, ineligible have been known to slip through particularly at the clerical level where

OPM uses an automates scoring system. (This problem is not likely to occur when using merit promotion lists.) Being familiar with the standards can avoid unnecessary headaches.

Now you know what to look for in an applicant. First, you can review the applicant's work experience and education to see if there is evidence that he/she possesses the KSAs. Second, these KSAs can be used to develop interview questions. (More on that later.)

Even though job analysis seems like a lot of work, this informal review makes a big difference in how you perceive the job and evaluate applicants.

Please note that the use of the KSAs to develop interview questions is perfectly acceptable even when the announcements and the evaluation criteria (weights and factors) were not done in the KSA format.

USE All Sources of Applicants

When a vacancy occurs our usual reaction is to get a civil service certificate from OPM and/or announce it under the merit promotion program. These sources are usually satisfactory but there are advantages to using all the flexibilities available to management. Civil service regulations allow management to select from any appropriate source. Assuming you are able to fill a job externally, you may want to consider:

1. Extending the area of consideration on vacancy announcements (subject to the conditions in any applicable labor agreement). The area of consideration is the area in which we publicize a vacancy. Extending the area region wide, nationwide, and to other parts of HHS or o other federal agencies may result in a better group of applicants. If it is extended outside the normal area, make sure the announcement is actually distributed to all the appropriate places.
2. If there is an open OPM announcement you may conduct external recruitment through schools, community organizations and paid advertising. OPM does no recruiting of its own. They merely post the announcement at the federal job information center and the state employment service. While these sources of applicants may be adequate there is no reason why we have to be limited to them. The average job seeker is more likely to check the newspaper everyday than visit the Job Information Center. If you choose to do paid advertising, the ad must be reviewed by the RPO, as there are several items that must be included in the wording. The most important point is to be sure that there is an open OPM announcement at the time- we cannot solicit applications from the public otherwise. The RPO will also provide assistance in controlling applications and insuring that we get considered properly.
3. Make use of the RPO's application supply file. We retain certain kinds of applications (primarily clerical) and there may be some good prospects on file. You may also keep copies of applications yourself on an informal basis. However, do not keep applications

from anyone who is not an OPM register or does not have civil service status. If you don't anticipate vacancies, refer the applicant to the RPO for placement assistance.

4. Consider the use of special appointing authorities such as Veterans Readjustment Appointments or those that allow the appointment of handicapped persons and disabled veterans. The RPO may have some applications on file or you may solicit them from local veterans groups and rehabilitation organizations.
5. Look for a good description for past duties. Applicants who have little to say may not have done anything except the most routine work. Be wary of expressions such as "assisted with..." "Exposed to..." Descriptions like those do not mean very much. Avoid reading between the lines – if the applicant performed certain duties, it should be clearly stated. Those who cite accomplishments may have greater position description instead of describing the job on the SF-171 are giving you very little useful information.
6. Check for references. If they are all relatives or people who are not likely to have good information to offer, make note to get additional names. You should also have the names, complete addresses of employers and phone numbers of previous supervisors. You will be doing some reference checks (see pages 20-22).

"what," and "why". Open-ended questions give you an opportunity to observe oral communication, reasoning ability and a variety of personal traits.

2. Avoid compound questions. One question at a time is enough.

3. Avoid leading questions ("you enjoy dealing with the public, don't you?"), Such questions tell the applicant what to say.

4. Avoid questions that require an inordinate knowledge of the job. Also, avoid jargon and acronyms, which may be unfamiliar to the applicant.

5. Avoid questions on sensitive topics that can be construed as discriminatory. That includes race, religion, national origin, marital status, union affiliation, age, sex, occupation of spouse, and political persuasion. Questions about physical limitations are appropriate when they are job related, handled with sensitivity and if appropriate, accompanied by an attempt at reasonable accommodation.

Also avoid any questions about family obligations or plans to start a family. Some selecting officials ask questions such as these to determine if the applicant is serious about long-term employment or if travel will be a problem. You're better off asking if they plan to make a career with us, or if frequent extended or unexpected trips would cause any difficulties. That type of question can be directed to both male and female applicants and doesn't pry into their personal lives.

6. Always show interest in what the applicant is saying. Look alert, pay attention and no doodling. Avoid showing emotion, which could signal your reaction to answers. Allow the applicant to speak at length. If the answer is too brief, pause as though you are waiting for more to be said. Silence is a question, too.

Kinds of Questions

There are three simple basic questions:

1. Simple questions, preferably open-ended, which would elicit information concerning prior experience, education, and so on.
2. Situational questions in which an applicant is asked how he/she would deal with various circumstances. For example: "How would you deal with a caller who wants to speak with your supervisor, or who is nasty and abusive?"
3. Discussion questions are typically used at group interviews and involve presenting a discussion topic. For example: "There have been numerous scandals in local government involving contracts, conflicts of interests, and fraud. What kinds of things should be done to minimize such problems from recurring?" A discussion question may be on any topic such as current events, or topic specifically related to the job.

1. Tell me about your experiences dealing with the public? Did you ever have to speak in front of a group? Tell me about it.

What kinds of things did you type? Did you work from rough draft? Dictaphone? Who checked spelling and grammar? How fast do you type? How accurately?

Did you screen calls for your supervisor? How did you handle calls when he/she wasn't available?

What subjects did you like best in school? What were your grades? Did you participate in extra-curricular activities?

Why did you choose a particular school or college?

What do you think are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses? (Look for reasonable self-assessment.)

I told you a few things about this vacancy. Do you think you will be good at it? Why?

Why do you think that this job will be better than your current one? Why do you want to work for the government?

What do you think you'd like to be doing a year from now? Three years from now?

2. Discuss the reasons for changing jobs in the past. You have already, we presume, asked how they liked their previous positions. Follow that with questions about the supervisory relationship. For example:

What kinds of supervisors do you work best with? (You should decide if you meet that description.)

Did you get along reasonably well with your current (or last) supervisor? Can I call him/her for a reference check? If not, is there someone else in your office that I can talk to?

Do you think your supervisor will tell me the same things about your performance as you already told me?

Now that you have a feel for the candidate's performance and working relationships, you can ask about the reasons he/she is changing or has changed jobs. We saved this question for later in the interview so that you can see if it makes sense in light of what you have been told. If you ask this question too soon the applicant may modify the answers of the other questions to suit the reason for leaving.

Keep in mind that a poor relationship with a supervisor is not necessarily a bad sign. At one time or another we've encountered supervisors who were somewhat unreasonable. It becomes a matter of concern when there has been a pattern of such relationships.

Then turn them into questions. Stick to realistic, job related situations as much as you can here are some examples:

1. You are auditing the travel voucher or an employee (or high level official) and the amounts claimed are in excess of the receipts given to you. The employee or official is uncooperative in providing documents. How would you handle this situation?
2. You have several urgent assignments including preparing for grievance hearing, training employees on a change in processing procedures, and recruiting effort in full swing. How would you go about setting priorities and allocating time and resources?
3. You have done an analysis of some food samples and found contamination. You suddenly realize that a mix-up may have occurred with the samples but can't get new ones done in time. What would you do?

4. A member of the public approaches you with a serious problem, which turns out to be beyond our agencies jurisdiction to deal with. The person is distraught and insists on some sort of help. What do you do?

These situations probably have no relevance whatsoever to positions in your organization and should not actually be in use. They are merely intended to illustrate the kinds of questions that can be developed.

Situational questions can have a variety of answers some better than others. Look for a clear expression of ideas, a reasonable course of action and evidence of tact and diplomacy. Ask follow-up questions and challenge responses, even if the answer you got was perfectly acceptable. These techniques show if they had truly considered all the aspects of the problem and are confident in their answers.

First Line Supervisory Positions

One of the most important assets of any organizations is the first line supervisors. If they are good supervisors, everyone's productivity is enhanced. And vice versa.

Unfortunately, it can be rather difficult to predict who will be a good supervisor. Having had supervisory experience in the past may not be very important, though some selecting officials tend to look for that first. The candidate who was never a supervisor may be the one with the right qualities. So, what should you look for?

As with any position the right place to start is job analysis. Job analysis helps identify the qualities that make a good supervisor and assists in singling out those who have the right raw material.

You will find that most supervisory jobs have duties such as these:

1. Plan, organize, assign and review work.
 2. Responsible for quality and quantity of work done by subordinates.
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1. How would you deal with a capable employee whose productivity is slipping?
 2. Let's say that the format for a complex report has changed. How would you get everyone trained? (If it were done as a formal training session, how would he/she proceed? Would senior employees be used to assist with it?)
 3. Let's say you have two clerical employees- one is a good typist, the other isn't (but nonetheless a good worker). The good typist is underutilized. How would you handle

this situation? (Among the better answers would be to review the poor typist's duties and re-delegate work that does not require a high level of proficiency.)

4. You have an employee with a long history of conduct problems but no action was ever taken against him. What would you tell another employee who complains that this situation is causing him to get extra work?
5. You have five employees who are working to the limit to keep work current. You are asked to give one to another unit due to an unexpected absence on their staff. How do you handle the situation? If you agree to let someone go, how would you handle your own work problem? How would you decide which one to give away?
6. Let's say you counsel an employee on performance. The employee seems to take it well and promises to improve but goes AWOL the next day. What would you do?

The above questions involve common supervisory situations. There are several possible answers to each of them, some better than others. Responses should show tact, sensitivity, resourcefulness, willingness to accept responsibility, and appreciation for the role a supervisor must play, and other similar qualities. You should have no trouble thinking up other situations from your own experiences.

When you are interviewing someone who was a supervisor in the past, you may want to ask about situations and problems previously encountered and how he/she resolved them.

The questions you develop for a supervisory position are added to those you would normally ask about prior work experience and education.

Innovative Approaches

You may experiment with other techniques for screening applicants, as long as you keep it job related. Among the things you may wish to try are the following:

1. Use the current or previous incumbents of the job to conduct a preliminary interview. They know the job better than you do and may have a better idea of what kind of person is most likely to be successful. For example, you can use your secretary to do a preliminary screening of the clerical applicants or to talk to people who will be his/her replacement. Since such interviews are at lower grades than you and they will not be making the selection, candidates may be more candid in their responses. You may find that these interviewers will have a substantially different perception than yours.
5. Ask the applicant to rate himself/herself on a variety of abilities.

Example: “which of the following do you think you are the best at: preparing voucher, typing, word processing, data entry, using computers, filing, working independently, dealing with the public, dealing with the front office, sorting mail, reviewing print-outs for errors, training new people, etc. Which do you think are your weakest areas?”

Questions such as these require thought and help to identify applicants who possess the qualities you believe are necessary for successful performance.

Things to look for

First and foremost you should be looking for evidence that the applicant possesses the knowledge, skills and abilities that were identified as being essential to performance on the job. Even though the interviewer may meander from one topic to another, keep your mind on the main objective- to determine if the applicant can do the job.

In addition to the above, you may want to consider the following items if they are relevant to the particular position:

- Oral communication: This is defined as being the ability to express ideas that others will understand. Pay attention to grammar, sentence structures, vocabulary, and ability to get to the point. Demonstrated abilities should be at a level commensurate with the position. Look for clear, logical and convincing replies.
- Writing ability: Applicants who orally express their thoughts in a clear manner may also, though not necessarily, have good writing abilities. You may get a better idea of writing ability by asking for a sample of it. Any document that was prepared on a previous job could serve the purpose. You can't be certain of its authenticity or its originality, but it's still a useful indicator.
- Typing or stenographic ability: This is one ability that can be measured accurately at the interview. The office of Personnel Management does not administer a performance test to applicants. They allow applicants to self-certify their level of ability. Most applicants are reasonably honest about it, though that is no consideration if you hire someone who exaggerated. We strongly recommend that you ask for a work sample from all outside applicants. Use any ordinary document from your office for this purpose. If it's handwritten make sure it is clearly legible. The typewriter must be in good working order and the applicant must be away from distractions. A brief warm-up should be permitted. Look at the final product and decide if it is reasonably acceptable.

- A word of caution: Don't call it a test. WE are not authorized to administer tests. Tell the applicant it's an exercise or work sample. Further, we recommend the use of work samples for external applicants only. The performance appraisal and supervisory recommendation should be adequate for internal applicants.

The Importance of Notes

You shouldn't have trouble getting through several interviews and keeping it all straight in your mind without notes. However, what will happen if a complaint arises months later or you wish you to have someone eliminated from consideration due to poor performance at the interview and you are asked for specific information?

In most cases, brief notes (mind joggers) will serve your needs. There is no requirement to keep them indefinitely and no established format. Such notes are your personal property and generally do not have to be shown to anyone else, unless you make them apart of an official file.

On the other hand, detailed notes are very important if it becomes necessary to submit an objection to the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) concerning an applicant. (An objection is a request to have someone deleted from a civil service register.) An objection is appropriate when an applicant is clearly not qualified or suited for the position and he/she is blocking the selection of someone else. The reasons we give must be job related, specific substantiated and sufficiently serious in nature. In other words, it must be a convincing case that this person can't do the job. Merely wanting to select a better, but lower ranking candidate cannot be the basis of an objection.

Objections may be made for a variety of reasons but most are based on the applicant's performance at the interview. In such a case, it will be necessary to cite specific things that applicants said or did. Direct quotes are the best. Though you may summarize or paraphrase as long as it is accurate and specific. Generalized conclusions ("applicants did not express himself well" or "applicant was rude") will not suffice unless they are supported by specific references to what was said or done. The RPO will utilize your notes to prepare the documentation for an objection.

The point we wish to emphasize is the usefulness of some sort of notes for all interviews and how important detailed information can be when the applicant is unacceptable.

If all else fails, seek out someone else to talk to.

We encourage getting references verbally to save time. Getting it by mail is usually more difficult as most employers are reluctant to say anything negative in writing. Place little value on a written reference given to you by the applicant- it may be "going away" present to a poor employee.

It is also difficult to keep written references confidential, unless it was absolutely essential to promise confidentiality as condition of getting a written reference. We will be obligated to allow the applicant to see it upon request.

We also suggest that you check with a former supervisor as well as the current one. A current supervisor may be tempted to give a better reference than is deserved in order to be relieved of a mediocre employee.

Use sound judgment in utilizing the results of reference-checks. A less-than-glowing report from one person may not be significant when all the other evidence is favorable. Few people will get accolades from every past supervisor \. A decision should be based on the preponderance of evidence.

Making Selections

Here are a few “Dos and Don’ts” to keep in mind when you have narrowed down the choices:

Do: Keep the KSAs in mind. Remember what you are looking for.

Do: Interview everybody, if practical.

Do: Remember our affirmative employment programs.

Do: Get a sample of typing ability when interviewing typists. Use any ordinary document from your office for this exercise. But don’t call it a test. (The only thing that can be called a test is the official OPM examination.)

Do: Find out if there will be a probationary period. That can be very important if you are not completely sold on the applicant.

Don’t: Make a commitment at the interview. Wait until you have considered everyone and did the reference checks.

Don’t: Make a firm commitment to any external applicants until you have a final okay from the RPO. In the meanwhile, you can make a tentative commitment.

Don’t: Allow yourself to be pressured into a hasty selection. You’re the one that has to live with the selected applicant.

Don’t: Get too many people involved in the selection. Others can help in the screening, but minimize the number actually involved in the selection.

SF-171: It should be up-to-date and, if photocopied, have an original signature. Check it for completeness.

Stay-In-School/Summer Aids: We must have documentation to verify compliance with the income criteria. Stay-in-Schooler's must also have certification and are students in good standing.

There may be other documents needed in some cases. Ask the RPO if you're not sure.

Conclusion

Making good selections entails knowing what knowledge, skills and abilities are needed for the job, carefully evaluating each applicant by in-depth interviews and reference checks. We have provided some suggestions on how to proceed with the evaluation. It may not be practical, or even desirable, to research every selection in such a thorough manner. However, find that the time you devote to improving your selection is time that is well sent and will repaid many times over.