

WORKFORCE HORIZONS

Planning Tomorrow's Workforce Today

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HOW DO I SORT THROUGH ALL THESE APPLICANTS TO DECIDE WHO TO INTERVIEW?

We hear a lot today about the shortage of qualified applicants and the brain drain as Baby Boomers and long-term employees retire. We hear about talent wars among organizations competing for a dwindling supply of qualified applicants for any position. But what about the problem of too many applicants?

Many of you have probably posted vacancies on JOB SEARCH and even though you tried to encourage only the most qualified to apply by describing preferred qualifications and realistic working conditions, you still get far too many applicants to interview them all. How do you determine which are the most qualified? How do you decide who to interview?

WORKFORCE PLANNING MAXIM OF THE DAY

*“A goal without a plan is just a wish.” –
Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

When you have too many applicants to interview, the practical answer is to create a series of hurdles that applicants must pass. Each hurdle screens out some applicants from further consideration while the remainder pass on to the next hurdle. Usually, initial hurdles are broad assessments of very basic qualifications. Successive hurdles are more refined assessments of job-related competencies.

For example, if you get a large response to a JOB SEARCH posting, first you can eliminate applicants who do not meet the Minimum Qualifications or do not have a required test score. This is the initial hurdle. Beyond this point, deciding who will be interviewed and who will not is not only a practical problem but an area often subject to legal challenge.

The process you use must be objective and job-related and be applied to all applicants in the same way. At each hurdle, all applicants included or excluded must be assessed on the same criteria.

One thing you should NOT do is simply hire someone you already know or who was referred to you, without seriously looking at the other candidates. In the first place, this type of decision is often made in an informal manner, relying on global impressions and subjective or non-job related criteria. So the assessment of the person's qualifications can be incomplete and subject to error. But no matter how well-qualified the referral or the candidate you know may be, if you make this type of hiring decision, you will be excluding other applicants who have not been evaluated on the same basis because they were not referred or you didn't know them. This could result in legal challenge on the basis of discrimination.

Although informal referral networks and acquaintances can be useful tools for *recruiting* applicants, they are not legally defensible selection procedures. Excluding applicants who don't belong to your referral network or circle of acquaintances could subject you to charges of discrimination. In addition, simply hiring an acquaintance or applicant who was referred, without interviewing others, violates the requirement of Article X of the Louisiana Constitution that state jobs be filled through open competition. Fulfilling this constitutional requirement is a responsibility of each state agency.

So, what criteria can we use to whittle down an applicant pool to a manageable number to interview? The most important aspects of the screening criteria are that they be:

1. documented as job-related,
2. as objective as possible,
3. applied equally to all applicants at each stage of the process.

What are some examples of possible screening criteria that can be used?

Desired qualifications of education, training or experience: This term refers to qualifications that go beyond the Minimum Qualifications. They are defined prior to the announcement and included in the posting. Desired qualifications may narrow or add to the basic Minimum

Qualifications but not reduce them. They should tailor the basic Minimum Qualifications to the needs of a specific position.

When stated clearly in a posting, desired qualifications may discourage candidates who do not possess them from even applying. Candidates who do not meet them may apply. But preference can be given to only those who meet the desired qualifications.

The key to defending desired qualifications is to be able to demonstrate that they are job-related. At a minimum, a valid position description showing how the desired qualifications are connected to position duties is needed. More concrete evidence, such as a job analysis or job profile is even better.

If you are relying solely on the opinion of a job expert such as a supervisor to define desired qualifications, it is best to include the input of more than one person familiar with the position to guard against personal bias. Also it is best to document the name, job title and qualifications of the person(s) who decided these qualifications were desired in case they are challenged. The person(s) defining the desired qualifications should be knowledgeable about the job. Obviously, if you use desired qualifications, someone must screen all applications submitted to determine which applicants meet them and which do not.

Higher cut scores on a required Civil Service test(s): Although Civil Service may set a minimum required score on a test such as the PET, you may use a higher cut score to whittle down the applicant pool. For example, you might decide to interview only people with scores in the 85th percentile or above. This can be a good tool to reduce the pool to manageable size. However, some cautions should be taken when using higher cut scores.

You should be consistent when using cut scores for similar positions. Don't set a higher cut score for one posting and then use a different one the next time the same or similar position is announced with a similar sized applicant pool. Also, be aware of the potential adverse impact of

using a higher cut score. Finally, although employment tests such as the PET are the best single predictors of job success, we usually want to look at more than one predictor. Tests can not measure all important job factors.

Minimal scores on agency required test(s):

Agencies may also administer their own job-related tests to assess competencies not assessed by Civil Service.

PPR scores (for promotional vacancies):

Another possible criterion is PPR ratings. You might interview only those with a certain minimum rating, such as “Exceeds Requirements,” on their most recent PPR. While this is a logical and job related criterion, it has potential problems. Some applicants may be unrated or some ratings may be questionable. Also, using PPR scores as a formal part of the selection process to exclude applicants could encourage employees to challenge ratings that are below whatever cut point you set. Like all other criteria, use PPR ratings with caution.

Formal application or resume screening process:

This is the most time-consuming method of dealing with large numbers of applicants. It is time consuming because it involves at least looking at every application that has passed prior hurdles (e.g. Minimum Qualifications and test scores) in some detail. All of these applicants are qualified. But you only want to interview those with the most potential. Some ways to provide additional screening are presented below.

Use an educational credential or number of years of experience higher than the Minimum Qualification as a cut-off. This is different from the previously mentioned desired qualifications because it is determined after the announcement and after seeing what scope of qualifications the applicants to the announcement possess. It is establishing a preference for superior qualifications over minimum qualifications and using these superior qualifications as a requirement to be interviewed.

For example, sometimes the job market or the response to a particular announcement may

provide you with a windfall of applicants with vastly superior qualifications compared to what you expected or normally get (e.g., when industries or private sector companies have layoffs). In such an instance, it would be reasonable to set a preference and interview only applicants with a particular educational credential such as a Masters Degree or Ph.d in a qualifying field even though the Minimum requirement is a baccalaureate degree or only interview applicants with ten years of experience even though the Minimum Qualification is five years. What you are looking for is an objective criterion that is obviously job-related and will vastly reduce the applicant pool to be considered and which can be assessed quickly by a review of applications or resumes. Picking a job-related credential or increased years of experience beyond the minimum qualification satisfies these requirements.

There is one word of caution here. Make sure you do not set the standard so high that you accidentally eliminate people you might want to consider. Research shows that as assessments of potential job success, minimum requirements of certain educational credentials or years of experience are the least predictive of job success (compared to written tests, structured interviews, some types of E & T's, etc. Therefore, you might be eliminating people who, although they do not possess the credential or specified years, might compensate for that with other job-related qualifications that would not be revealed until some later stage of the assessment process that is more predictive of job success.

Sort the remaining applicants into groups and only interview the superior ones. Once you have used the relatively simple and objective hurdles previously described to reduce your applicant pool, if it is still too many to interview, you are left with no alternative but an in-depth review of the remaining applications. This is best done by at least two people to avoid personal bias and both should be knowledgeable about the duties and requirements of the vacant position.

It is best to sort the applications into only a few groups such as “superior,” “well qualified,” and “qualified.” The number and names of the

groups are your choice. You may even simply use two groups such as “superior” (the ones you will interview) and “qualified.” Or, instead of naming groups, you might decide that you want to interview no more than a set number of applicants (e.g., seven) so you just review the applications and pick out the top seven.

The review is best done by first getting the evaluators to agree on and explicitly state some specific competencies or experience that will make an applicant superior. This is so they will be on the same page and to have them thinking about these competencies as they review each application. Assigning an application to a group may be done independently by each person and results compared to reach a consensus afterwards. Or, each application can be reviewed and discussed by the evaluators before assigning it to a group. You can set rules such as only placing in the “superior” group applications that both evaluators agree are superior. Alternatively, you could include any application that at least one evaluator thought was superior. It is okay for an evaluator to change his opinion after discussion. The main point is to keep the assignment based on job-related factors.

Develop a formal plan of scoring applications similar to the Civil Service Experience and Training ratings (E&T's). When done with proper documentation and a job analysis, this can be the most legally defensible method of evaluating applications. The drawback is that it is very labor-intensive and time consuming. Even when a formal job analysis is not done and a mechanical rating system is developed based on a rational review of job specs and other readily available job information, the process of creating the rating system and applying it is very time-consuming.

If you would like some assistance from Civil Service in addressing the issue of screening applications to determine which ones to interview, contact your Staffing Division Assistance Team Representative.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers.” – Thomas Jefferson

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Comments and submissions: We welcome questions about workforce planning and suggestions for improvements to the newsletter as well as submissions of articles about what your agency is doing in workforce planning. Questions, comments, and requests to be added to the distribution list for the newsletter should be sent to the editor.

Current and Back Issues are accessible under “Workforce Planning Newsletter” in the HR Reference section of the Civil Service web page at www.civilservice.louisiana.gov