



Volunteer Screening

Components of effective volunteer screening

Screening is a process used by organizations to ensure that they select only the best possible applicants for volunteer or paid positions. It is an essential part of an overall risk management program that can be used by nonprofit organizations to protect vulnerable service recipients, other staff members, and the organization itself from exposure to individuals who pose unacceptable, identifiable threats.

What kind of screening process will be appropriate is driven by the requirements of the specific position. The first step in the screening process, therefore, is developing a position description. In addition to the position description, the basic screening process includes the use of written applications, face-to-face interviews, and reference checks. More extensive screening may be required for some positions - including various kinds of record checks, observation, specialized interviews, and additional reference checks.

1. Position descriptions

The duties, responsibilities, required experience, and limitations of the position guide the screening process. Position descriptions lay the groundwork for establishing "bona fide occupational qualifications" or BOQs. BOQs become important in the event an organization is legally challenged by an applicant concerning information requested for screening purposes or about training and education requirements. Using BOQs will help ensure that an organization is not acting arbitrarily or in violation of anti-discrimination laws in screening applicants. If the position description calls for the handling of money, for example, the organization has a legitimate interest in the applicant's experience handling money, and any history of past improprieties concerning the handling of funds. If the position described is a truck driver, the applicant's financial history may not be relevant, but driving records would be.

2. Written applications

Application forms are the most common source of information about applicants for staff positions - both paid and volunteer. Application forms that incorporate the following elements provide a solid foundation for screening:

- o **Identification** - basic facts about the applicant such as name, addresses for the past several years, and telephone number.
- o **Qualifications** - education, training and certificates or licenses (with expiration dates) relevant to the particular position sought by the applicant.

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2. Written applications (cont')

Application forms should incorporate the following elements:

- o **Experience** - relevant experience, both volunteer and paid, with dates of service, description of duties, and the names of the organization and the applicant's immediate supervisor.
- o **Background and references** - if relevant to the position, the application should ask for a listing of any convictions for serious criminal or serious motor vehicle violations; at least three personal references (individuals who are not related, but who know the applicant well) should be requested, as well as the nature of the relationship and the length of time known to the reference.
- o **Waiver/consent** - the application should include a statement that the applicant certifies the information provided is true and accurate and authorizes the organization to verify it. Further, the application should require that the applicant specifically waive rights to confidentiality and authorize the organization to perform specific procedures such as criminal history record checks, reference checks, employment verification, etc.
- o **Signature and date.**

3. Interviews

The face-to-face interview is the best opportunity for the applicant and organization to size each other up and determine if they share common interests. While an interview is only a part of a comprehensive screening process, it is important as the interview can uncover grounds for rejecting an applicant that were not apparent from the written application. Interviewers need to prepare for and conduct interviews properly. This preparation should include a review of the requirements for the position as well as the contents of the applicant's application or résumé. Significant questions should be written down so that the interviewer will not forget to ask them and so that there will be consistency among all interviews for the same position. Interviewers should be familiar with the types of questions that can be asked as well as those that should never be asked of an applicant.

4. Reference checks

Checking references, like interviewing, begins with preparation: becoming familiar with the position description and information provided by the applicant. References may be checked by telephone or through a written request. Most human resource professionals suggest that the initial contact with a reference should be made by telephone. If the reference is able to provide information over the telephone, you will receive the information more expeditiously. In addition, the telephone is an interactive medium permitting follow-up questions for clarification. The reference checker can also assess the non-verbal quality of the information such as the tone of voice, any hesitancy, emphasis, and demeanor. When checking references,

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a script is useful to ensure that relevant information is collected in a consistent fashion on all applicants. Reference checks should be conducted by the person who will interview the applicant.

5. Record checks

Depending upon the nature of the position, relevant information may be found in criminal history records, child abuse registries, driving records, and credit bureaus. The use of these information sources needs to be balanced against the cost and relevancy to the specific position in question. In some cases, relevant information may not be readily available to your organization. For example, in New York state, criminal history records may not be accessed unless there is a specific law or regulation permitting the organization to obtain them.

6. Other screening techniques

Psychological, chemical, and mechanical testing may be appropriate for some positions. A nonprofit must first determine if the benefits derived from using such tests justify the costs of conducting them.

*For more information on the topic of screening applicants, see *Staff Screening Tool Kit: Building a Strong Foundation Through Careful Staffing*, published by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.*

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