

A GUIDE TO INTERVIEWING AND REFERENCE CHECKING

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This document will be made available, upon request, in a form (such as Braille, large print or audio cassette) usable by individuals with disabilities.

PREFACE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Interviewing Paradox

The interview is by far the most widely used means of gathering information for making hiring decisions. For most supervisors, it would be unthinkable to hire someone without interviewing them. However, the interview is a complex and difficult cognitive and social task. Ample research evidence shows that the traditional unstructured interview is very poor at predicting future job success. Yet the interview as a "casual conversation" persists -- little or no preparation, questions "ad-libbed" based on the applicant's resume, and evaluations based on intuition.

To further complicate matters, many applicants go to great lengths to induce positive reactions among interviewers to "tip the scale" in their favor. There is a huge business in books, courses, and videos teaching "impression management," a term used to describe tactics interviewees can use to create a positive, albeit artificial, image of themselves. Poorly prepared interviewers, using unstructured interviews, can easily fall prey to the polished applicant who can confidently recite generalities and "canned" answers.

So, on the one hand we have a process that applicants and supervisors expect and have faith in. On the other hand, the overwhelming evidence paints a rather gloomy picture of the effectiveness of the traditional unstructured interview. How do we resolve this paradox?

Fortunately, there are proven techniques that have been found to greatly enhance the effectiveness of the job interview. The "structured" interview process incorporates these techniques, and will be the focus of this *Guide*.

About this *Guide*

One of the biggest problems facing supervisors is the "how to" of interviewing and reference checking. After an overview of legal issues, this *Guide* will take the reader through the steps involved in developing and conducting a structured interview. Throughout this *Guide* you will find many examples to illustrate key steps. Supporting material can be found in several appendices.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What is the Interview?

The interview should be viewed as a tool that is used for three purposes:

(1) Gather information from the applicant.

This is the primary objective. The information you gain through the interview will help you make a decision about the right person for the job. It often helps hiring supervisors to think about their objective in the interview as trying to predict the outcome of the individual's performance evaluation after six months or a year on the job. Essentially, you are trying to predict future job performance -- a task that is difficult, and a result that is never perfect.

(2) Provide information to the applicant.

Interviews also provide information to help the applicants make an informed choice. Information about the department, job, and conditions of employment can serve both to attract applicants and also make sure applicants have a "realistic job preview," so as to avoid false expectations about the job that can lead to early turnover.

(3) Check personal chemistry.

The interview allows both parties to assess each other's personal style and approach to work to determine whether there is a good fit with the job/organization/supervisor.

Why is the Interview Important?

Selecting the right person for the job -- a person who is highly motivated and who possesses the skills needed to yield quality performance -- is vitally important. What are some the costs of making a poor hiring decision?

- Turnover, which then requires additional recruiting, interviewing, and training expenses.
- Lost productivity.
- Negative impacts on work group morale.

- Poor job performance.
- Terminations, which can create legal liability.
- Disappointment for you, your agency, and the applicant.

A \$1,000,000 Decision

One dramatic way of thinking about magnitude of making a hiring decision is that it is truly a "million dollar decision." When you consider salary, benefits, training, and other costs that are expended over a 30-year career in Vermont state government, that total can easily come to a million dollars. In view of this, do you pay enough attention to your hiring decisions?

The Structured Interview

Numerous studies have supported the superiority of the structured interview. Structured interviews have been shown to be more reliable, valid (accuracy in predicting future performance), and legally defensible. The following are the components of a structured interview process. Each of these components will be covered in this *Guide*.

- Base questions on a job analysis.
- Ask the same questions of each candidate.
- Use better types of interview questions.
- Limit follow-up questioning.
- Use longer interviews or larger number of questions.
- Use panel interviews.
- Rate each answer or use multiple rating scales.
- Use anchored ratings scales.
- Take detailed notes.
- Do not allow questions from the candidate until after the interview.
- Use the same interviewer(s) for all candidates

CHAPTER 2

LEGAL ISSUES

The interview is a tool used to make an employment decision and as such is subject to various legal standards. The traditional unstructured interview is highly vulnerable to legal challenge because of potential bias made possible by its subjective and inconsistent nature. On the other hand, structured interviews may be more resistant to legal challenge because of their heightened objectivity, standardization, and job-relatedness.

When a complaint does arise from an interview process it generally involves an unsuccessful applicant who is outraged with the interview because s/he:

- Perceives that the interview was unfair.
- Perceives that the interview was not job-related.
- Perceives interviewer behavior that reflects or suggests bias or discrimination.

Non-Discrimination

The State of Vermont is an equal opportunity employer. The law and State's personnel policies and practices prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sex, sexual orientation (as provided by 21 V.S.A. § 495), place of birth, age, or physical or mental condition (a person with a qualifying disability) in all employment practices.

Problematic Areas in the Interview

As it has evolved, the case law related to unfair discrimination in employment interviewing falls into three main areas:

(1) Interviewer Behaviors

Many cases have raised doubts about the appropriateness of certain interviewer behaviors, especially when interviewer questioning varies across groups of applicants (i.e., asking a question of one group and not another), conveys an impression of discriminatory intent, or involves non-job-related or otherwise inappropriate inquiries. Of special concern has been interviewer questions on applicant arrest and conviction records, physical and mental disabilities, and marital and family status.

(2) Subjectivity in Evaluation

The degree of subjectivity is often grounds for legal criticism of the interview. The argument is usually made that when interviewers do not have clear guidelines for evaluating a candidate, subjectivity guides the process and provides a ready mechanism for illegal discrimination.

(3) Selection and Training of Interviewers

Several cases have criticized the race and/or sex makeup of the interview panel (i.e., not representative of the candidate pool) and the lack of interviewer training.

Recommendations

Based on the case law, the following actions are strongly recommended to enhance the legal defensibility of the interview by making it a "structured" process:

- Assure job-relatedness through a thorough job analysis.
- Be prepared to show what screening factors were used, how they relate to the job, and how one candidate possesses more of the factor than another.
- Carefully select and train interviewers.
- Use questions that are job-related and ask the same questions of all applicants.
- Use a panel of interviewers who reflect the diversity of the applicant pool, including such factors as race, sex, and national origin.
- Be prepared to support all hiring decisions with specific facts.
- Maintain a system of thorough documentation.

In Appendix A the reader will find a guide to acceptable and unacceptable pre-employment inquiries.

Interviewing and the ADA

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) gives federal civil rights protection to people with disabilities. It guarantees individuals with disabilities equal opportunity in employment, public accommodations, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.

Employers can make the following inquiries:

- State the physical requirements of the job, hours of work, travel requirements, and other job responsibilities and ask candidates if they will be able to meet these requirements.
- Ask about an applicant's non-medical qualifications and skills, such as education and work history.
- Ask applicants to demonstrate how they would perform job tasks.

For all candidates, it is recommended that you describe the essential job functions (i.e., job tasks that are "fundamental" and must be performed to accomplish the job) and ask the applicant if he or she can perform the functions. This can be done by providing the applicant with a list of essential functions before the interview or describing them during the interview. Ask the applicant "Can you perform these tasks?" For example:

The person in this Customer Service Clerk position must respond to questions and inquiries from clients both in-person and on the phone. The job also requires filing alphabetically hand-written and typed documents, operating standard office equipment, such as a computer terminal, copier, and fax machine, and moving boxes weighing up to 50 pounds short distances on a daily basis. Can you perform these tasks? (Can you perform these tasks with or without a reasonable accommodation?)

Pre-employment inquiries CANNOT be made regarding the nature or extent of an applicant's disability:

- Do not ask the applicant about any visible physical characteristics, i.e., scars, burns, missing limbs.
- Do not ask if the applicant is in good health.
- Do not ask if an applicant has ever had an emotional illness or has consulted a psychologist or psychiatrist.
- Do not ask if an applicant has ever had a drug or drinking problem.

- Do not ask an applicant if anyone in his/her family or any acquaintance has an illness or injury or history of illness.
- Do not ask if an applicant has ever filed for or collected workers' compensation insurance.

Once a conditional offer of employment is made, disability-related questions can be asked and medical examinations can be required, provided this is done for all entering employees in that job category. If the question or the medical examination screens out an individual due to a disability, an employer would have to show that the rejection was "job-related and consistent with business necessity."

When employers could "reasonably believe" that an applicant will need reasonable accommodation to perform the functions of the job, limited questions, such as whether the applicant needs reasonable accommodation and what type of reasonable accommodation, can be asked. These questions can be asked where:

- Due to an obvious disability an employer reasonably believes an applicant will need reasonable accommodation.
- An applicant has voluntarily disclosed a hidden disability.
- An applicant has voluntarily disclosed the need for reasonable accommodation to perform the job.

The ADA is a complex and evolving law. While this *Guide* has provided an overview of the law as it relates to interviewing, it is recommended that any supervisor who is faced with an ADA issue consult with his/her personnel officer or the Employee Relations Division of the Department of Personnel.

CHAPTER 3

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Often interviewers neglect interview preparation because they think it's too time consuming. However, preparation is the single most important thing you can do to become a better interviewer.

Analyze the Job

A job analysis is a systematic process for identifying the important job duties and the characteristics necessary to effectively perform those job duties. A job analysis provides an objective basis for deciding who is the best fit for a job.

Identify Job Duties

Your first step is to identify the essential job duties, which are those tasks, responsibilities or assignments that are important to the employee's overall success or failure in the position. There is no single best way to do this, but the important point is to use some systematic method, for instance:

- Review the job description and any other relevant materials.
- Talk with the previous incumbent, if applicable.
- Talk with other employees in the same job, if applicable.
- Talk with other supervisors, if applicable.
- Review the performance expectations established for the position's previous incumbent, if applicable.
- Identify "critical incidents" illustrating effective and ineffective behavior on the job (See below).

An effective way of writing job duties is to phrase them by using an action verb and its object. For example:

- Prepares a variety of reports on financial activities and status.
- Responds to telephone inquiries from clients.
- Interviews clients and family members to gather personal, social and background information.
- Configures and assists in setting up new computer work stations.

The result of this first step is a list of the essential duties you have identified for the job.

Identify Job Requirements

Your second step is to identify the job requirements. Job requirements are those characteristics necessary for effective job performance (of the duties you just identified). In other words, what characteristics are you looking for in the successful job applicant? The best way to do this is to **describe the behavior that you are looking for.**

- Using information gathered about the job, identify job requirements.
- Make sure to state job requirements in behavioral terms (what is the behavior you are looking for).

Examples of job requirements:

- Plans and organizes work in order to meet established deadlines.
- Can inspect buildings to ensure compliance with fire codes.
- Is pleasant, helpful and courteous to clients.
- Checks work thoroughly for mistakes.
- Gets along with co-workers.
- Can calibrate and operate environmental laboratory equipment.
- Can effectively supervise a staff of seven eligibility specialists.

The result of this second step is a list of job requirements necessary to perform the essential duties you have identified for the job.

Use Critical Incidents to Analyze the Job.

Critical incidents are an excellent way to identify important job duties and job requirements. (As you will see shortly, they can also provide the basis for writing interview questions). Critical incidents are "stories" that describe what ineffective versus effective workers do in job-related situations. For example, consider the follow critical incident:

One morning an angry client began yelling at our receptionist. The receptionist kept her composure and calmly asked the client questions until finding the source of the problem. In the end, the client apologized for the outburst and left satisfied.

This would identify as a job duty:

Interacting with clients on a face-to-face basis to solve problems and answer questions.

It would also serve to identify job requirements, such as:

Can interact tactfully with irate clients.

Choose the Most Important Job Requirements

Finally, you must choose the most important job requirements from those you have identified. You are likely to have identified more job requirements than you will be able to cover in a typical 45 - 60 minute interview, so you'll need to narrow down your list. Ask yourself:

- What's trainable vs. critical at job entry?
- Is the job requirement more of a technical knowledge (which can be assessed through resume review) or is it more of a job-related competency (which is best assessed in the interview)?

To expand on this second point, if you look at the above list of examples of behavioral job requirements, you will notice that some emphasize technical knowledge, while others are more general job-related competencies. For example:

Can calibrate and operate environmental laboratory equipment.

This job requirement is primarily based on technical knowledge, which is best used to screen applicants, for instance, in making a decision about who to interview (See "Select Candidates to Interview," p.21). That is, one can often find evidence of such a job requirement in past job experience by reviewing the application and resume. You may choose to interview only those candidates who have such experience.

On the other hand, consider:

Is pleasant, helpful and courteous to clients.

This is a more general job-related competency, which would be very difficult to ascertain from an application/resume. So, if this type of job requirement is to be assessed, the interview is a good (and sometimes the only) method.

Incidentally, some job requirements contain aspects of both technical knowledge and job-related competencies. For example, consider: "Can effectively supervise a staff of seven eligibility specialists." Here we might want to first assess technical knowledge through a resume review for previous supervisory experience and then assess the applicant's supervisory competence (delegation, performance management, leadership style, etc.) in the interview.

The result of this final step is a list of the job requirements that will be covered in the interview. (You may also identify the job requirements that you will use in your initial screening of applicants for interview).

Write Interview Questions Based on Your Analysis of the Job

There are several types of questions that can be used in the interview. The types vary in terms of the assumptions one makes and their "information yield."

Experience/Activity Questions

This type of question gathers information about the kinds of experiences or activities the person has had in the past. The assumption underlying this type of question is that "experience equals excellence" -- a candidate who has done something has done it well. Some examples:

How has your previous experience prepared you for the duties of this position?

How many employees did you supervise in your last job?

What courses have you taken in environmental engineering?

What is your experience working with computers?

Generally, this information can be found in the application/resume and is best used to make screening rather than selection decisions.

The assumption that just because someone has done something they have done it well is very weak. Thus, experience/activity questions are "low yield" in terms of their ability to predict future job performance.

Self-Evaluative Questions

This type of question asks candidates to be reflective in providing information about themselves, such as likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, goals, attitudes, and philosophies. There is a two-part assumption underlying this type of question (a) the candidate is able to articulate a response (e.g., they have actually thought about "where they want to be in five years") and (b) the candidate will give you an honest and non-exaggerated response. Some examples:

What did you like most about your last job?

What are your strong points? Your weaknesses?

Why are you better suited for this position than other candidates?

We're looking for a self-starter. Are you a self-starter?

If you could create your ideal job, what job would you create?

If you had to describe yourself, what words would you use?

Where do you want to be five years from now?

While very common, self-evaluative questions are particularly prone to exaggeration. The highly verbal have a clear advantage (those who can convincingly articulate specific goals -- real or concocted, i.e., "talk a good game").

Self-evaluative questions are "low yield" because the assumptions underlying self-evaluative questions are very weak. Responses to this type of question are a very poor source of information about an applicant's future job performance.

Situational Questions

These are "what if..." questions. They describe a problem situation and ask the job candidate how he or she would handle it. The assumption here is that intentions can predict future behavior (people tend to do what they say they will). Some examples:

You and a coworker are jointly responsible for completing an important work assignment. You feel that your coworker is not doing his or her share of the work. What would you do?

What would you do if an employee called in sick three Mondays in a row?

You find it extremely difficult to work with one of your co-workers. This person is always trying to make you look bad and him/herself look good with your boss. How would you handle this situation?

You are conducting a meeting. While you are in the process of explaining an important new operational procedure, one of your staff disrupts the group by telling a joke. What would you do?

Situational questions can be quite effective if the preferred response is not transparent to the interviewee. The applicant will most likely describe what they think they should do, which may or may not be what they would actually do. Thus, the weakness in situational questions is that you find out if the candidate knows how he/she should handle the situation, you don't know necessarily how the candidate would handle it.

The assumption that "intentions predict future behavior" is a relatively strong assumption, and situational questions can be considered "moderate yield" in terms of their ability to predict future job performance.

**Behavior
Description
Questions**

Behavioral questions ask for specific examples of past behavior that relate to the requirements of the job. Responses contain detailed information -- situations, actions, and outcomes. These questions usually start with: "Tell me about..." or "Give me an example...". They also use superlative adjectives -- most, last, least, toughest, worst -- which serve to stimulate recall of specific events. The assumption underlying this type of question is that the best predictor of future performance is past performance in similar circumstances. Some examples:

*The best prophet of
the future is the past.*

-Lord Byron

Tell me about the last time that you put in extra effort to perform a task that was not specifically your responsibility.

Tell me about the most recent time you experienced a personality conflict with someone you worked with.

Tell me about a time when you felt it was necessary to talk to an employee about the need for improvement in his or her performance.

Behavior description questions are "high yield." Research has shown that behavior description questions are the most effective type of interview question in terms of their ability to predict future job performance. This is because the assumption that the best predictor of future performance is past performance in similar circumstances is very strong. In addition, behavior description questions are much more difficult to exaggerate or distort than any of the other types of interview questions.

**The Power of
Behavioral
Responses**

Comparing responses to "traditional" interview questions versus behavioral questions can clearly illustrate how much more detailed and useful responses to behavioral questions are. For example:

Responses to traditional questions

I am very good with people.

I'm a detail-oriented person.

Responses to behavioral questions

Recently, I helped settle a dispute between two co-workers....

I set up my own system to double-check log entries....

One of the advantages of using superlative adjectives (such as most, least, best, worst, hardest, etc.) in behavioral questions is that you will find where one applicant's description of behavior "fits on the scale" of behaviors described by other applicants. For instance, compare these examples of "most effort."

I worked an extra hour....
versus
I worked 12-hour days for two weeks....

Guidelines for Developing Questions

Start with a job requirement.

For example: *Is pleasant, helpful and courteous to clients.*

Think of a situation in which this job requirement (or the lack of it) would be important to job performance (using critical incidents is an especially effective way of doing this).

For example: *Dealing effectively with a client who says she has not received a check due her and no one will help her. She is very irate.*

Behavioral Questions

To write a **behavioral question**, formulate a question about past behavior that involves this type of situation. Start the question with "Give me an example" or "Tell me about a time." Use a superlative adjective in the question (e.g., most, least, best, worst, hardest, last) to help focus the interviewee's attention on specific, concrete examples.

For example: *Tell us about the most difficult or irate client you have had to handle.*

Situational Questions

To write a **situational question**, formulate a hypothetical "what if" question that involves this situation.

For example: *A client walks up to your desk. She says she was told that a check due from your office had been sent five days ago. She claims she has not received the check. She says she has bills to pay, and no one will help her. She is very angry. How would you handle this situation?*

A critical component of the structured interview process is to use "better" types of questions, such as situational and behavioral questions. In Appendix B you can find a list of examples of behavioral interview questions.

The Interview Pattern

The interview pattern is the set of questions you prepare for the interview.

Steps in forming the interview pattern. (1) Always start with a broad review of previous experience to elicit or clarify information concerning work history, and education and training.

How has your previous experience prepared you for the duties of this position?

Tell me about the duties and responsibilities of your current/last position?

(3) For each job requirement, prepare several questions that relate to it.

(4) Use a mix of question types. Use self-evaluative and experience type questions sparingly, generally only as a "lead in" to other better types of questions. As a rule of thumb, aim to have at least 70% behavioral type questions, 20% situational type questions, and 10% self-evaluative or experience type questions.

(5) Interviews that exceed an hour tax the patience of participants, and very brief interviews are unreliable. Generally aim for 45-60 minutes, so you'll need to develop enough questions for this time period.

(6) Adapt questions for people with little or no experience (using situational questions is one way to develop questions for candidates lacking sufficient work experience to respond to behavioral questions).

(7) Develop a few "flip side" questions. Generally, you are seeking positive examples. However, it is quite useful to include a few questions that seek "negative" examples in order to gain a balance of information. For example:

Think of a time you set a difficult goal for yourself and you were able to achieve it. Describe the situation and how you handled it.

Then, a "flip side" question:

Now think of a time you set a difficult goal for yourself and were not able to achieve it. Describe the situation and how you handled it.

Never attempt to "ad lib" your way through the interview. It is a critical component of the structured interview process to prepare questions before the interview.

An Example of an Interview Pattern.

(Overview question)

Tell us about the duties and responsibilities of your current position.

(Job requirement: "Shows good interpersonal skills with clients.")

The people we are most concerned with are our clients. What communication strengths do you have that make you suited for this type of work?

Tell us about a specific incident when you used your interpersonal skills to deal with a difficult or irate person.

Now, I'd like you to describe a time when you felt you were not as effective or successful in dealing with a difficult or irate person.

(Job requirement: "Manages time efficiently.")

Heavy caseloads are the norm in our department rather than the exception. What kind of experience do you have dealing with a heavy workload?

Can you give us a detailed example of what you do on your current job to organize yourself.

You find yourself with a heavy caseload. What steps would you take to ensure that each case gets "equal time"?

From time to time, we find ourselves a bit behind on some task. Tell us about the time when you fell furthest behind your list of things to do.

(Job requirement: "Gathers, organizes and synthesizes information to effectively solve problems.")

Tell us about a time when you made a decision or solved a problem which required a lot of hard thinking and careful analysis on your part.

This job requires you to interact with outside organizations which file paperwork to this agency. Your first day on the job you receive calls from two individuals complaining about the process required to file this paperwork. Your coworker tells you that your predecessor set up this specific paperwork process because the information gathered is important. You are now on the phone with yet a third frustrated caller who says she can't even figure out how to complete the first of four required forms. She says the process is a complete waste of time. How would you handle this situation?

Tell me about a time when you came up with an especially creative solution to a problem.

Develop a Rating Guide for Evaluating the Answers to your Questions

In advance of the interview, you should devise an evaluation procedure to have a standard way of rating the answers you get to your interview questions. You should use a standard format because it:

- provides documentation to justify your decisions.
- structures your decision making.
- helps you to avoid snap judgments.

Rating Formats

Basically, there are three approaches:

MOST DESIRABLE Rate each answer as it is given.

GOOD Rate each job requirement based on responses to one or more questions.

LEAST DESIRABLE Overall rating at end.

Research on the interview generally supports the superiority of rating each interview answer as it is given. This is because judgments are directly linked to specific responses. Rating separate job requirements, based on the responses to the several questions used to assess that job requirement, is also a good approach. However, a single overall rating is not recommended.

Steps to develop a rating format

- (1) Choose some rating scale. A five-point scale is probably best.
- (2) Choose evaluative anchors for at least three of the points on the scale (for a five-point scale).

For example:

1	2	3	4	5
Poor Response		Good Response		Excellent Response

1	2	3	4	5
Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory		Superior

- (3) It is recommended that you also develop descriptive anchors for the scale. These are short narrative illustrations of the type of response one might expect for that point on the scale and are used as benchmarks to help determine the appropriate numeric score. This is especially important for panel interviews so that all members have a common understanding of what, for instance, would constitute a "superior" response. Even if you don't actually put the anchors on the scale, it is critical that the panel members at least discuss each question and how they would value certain responses. One way to develop descriptive

anchors is to think of persons on the job you would rate as superior, satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and estimate how these persons would respond to each question.

Example 1: Rate each answer as it is given.

Question: Setting priorities and planning are important job requirements. Can you give me a specific example from your past jobs or other experiences where you had to set priorities and plan your work?

Five point Scale →

Evaluative Anchors →

Descriptive Anchors →

	1	2	3	4	5
	Marginal answer		Good answer		Excellent answer
	No real system used.		Considered task importance and did the most important first.		Used a specific system involving listing the tasks and assigning priorities.

Example 2: Rate each answer as it is given.

Question: Tell us about the last time that you put in extra effort to perform a task that was not specifically your responsibility.

Five point Scale →

Evaluative Anchors →

Descriptive Anchors →

	1	2	3	4	5
	Poor Response		Good Response		Excellent Response
	Examples of poor responses: Does just enough to get by. Unable to give examples of performing a task outside normal scope of responsibilities. Complains or resists performing tasks.			Examples of excellent responses: Takes responsibility for tasks and sees that they are completed. Puts in significant time and effort, without being asked, to ensure that a job is well done. Performs tasks without complaint or procrastination.	

Example 3: Multiple ratings at end (where you would rate "as a whole" all the questions asked that related to this job requirement).

Job requirement: Shows good interpersonal skills with clients.

Five point Scale →

Evaluative Anchors →

Descriptive Anchors →

	1	2	3	4	5
	Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory		Superior
	Shows a lack of awareness of the needs of others; talks as though he or she has an adversarial relationship towards others; uses jargon without explanations; demonstrates lack of interpersonal control of situations.		Demonstrates an understanding that he or she must treat others with fairness, dignity and compassion; recognizes that he or she may need to verify that explanations are understood.		In addition to meeting the satisfactory criteria, shows that he or she must deal objectively with any unpleasant situation; shows the ability to maintain interpersonal control of a difficult situation and propose changes.

Interview Guide

The interview guide is the end result of your preparation. It is the "script" for your interview, and functions as your "data gathering" sheet. Your interview guide should include:

- Structuring statement (see "Structuring," p.24).
- Questions organized by job requirement.
- Rating guides for each question (If you're doing multiple ratings at end, you can have them on a separate sheet).
- Space for note taking.

Developing a good rating guide is one of the steps in the structured interview process that is often neglected because it does require some "extra" effort and some hiring supervisors object to it as "overly mechanical." However, the research clearly points to the benefits of using an anchored rating scale, either for each answer or multiple scales. Even if you do not go to the extent of creating a ratings scale with evaluative and descriptive anchors, use some kind of structured process to evaluate candidate responses because you must be prepared to support your decision with specific facts.

Plan the Interview

The Panel Interview

The Department of Personnel strongly recommends the use of panel interviews whenever practical. Panel interviews have been shown to increase the accuracy, validity, and defensibility of the interview process. Some of the reasons for the superiority of the panel interview include:

- Better information is collected since tasks are shared (i.e., asking questions, listening, note taking, etc.).
- Having multiple raters tends to minimize or "balance out" the individual biases of raters.
- Multiple raters can contribute their unique perspective and perception, which leads to better decisions.
- Panels tend to increase the feeling of accountability for the interviewers ("keeps everyone honest"), thus making it less likely that inappropriate content will enter the interview process.
- Panel interviews are viewed as fairer by applicants.

Guidelines for Panel Interviews

Some guidelines to consider when forming an interview panel:

- Panel members should be diverse with respect to such factors as race, sex and ethnic origin (and should be on the panel for all interviews not just those with a female candidate, for example).
- Panels should generally have three members, but not more than five members.
- Choose a chairperson who will lead the interview process/introductions.
- Panel members should take turns asking questions.
- Make clear the role of members in advance (i.e., are they there to advise/recommend to another decision maker or make the hiring decision by group consensus, etc.).
- The panel should be made up of individuals equivalent to or at a higher level than the position being filled. Panel members can include: co-worker(s); the hiring supervisor; the division manager; a person from another division in your own department; your personnel officer; or a person from another department, who is knowledgeable about the department (e.g., customer) or the position being filled (e.g., computer professional).

Select Candidates to Interview

As hiring supervisor you must consider all applicants referred to you on a hiring certificate, but may choose to interview only those applicants who appear to most closely match the job requirements. An exception is that any applicants with disabilities who have requested the mandatory interview option (See Department of Personnel Policy Number 4.9, Mandatory Interview) and appear on a hiring certificate must be interviewed (they will be noted "Mandatory Interview" on your hiring certificate).

The Department of Personnel encourages hiring officials to interview State and agency promotional candidates. Some agencies have their own interviewing policies, so check with your personnel officer.

Your first decision is whether you are going to offer an interview to all interested candidates or limit yourself to a selected subset. If you choose to limit yourself to a subset, you need to be able to document why you chose to interview only certain applicants. That is, you should be prepared to show what screening factors you used and how they relate to the job.

The job analysis that you used to identify job requirements can be used to identify these screening criteria, especially those "technical knowledge" type job requirements (see "Identify Job Requirements," p. 9). Using these criteria, you can create a checklist that you can use to screen your applications.

What to Say When Contacting Candidates

Whether you choose to contact candidates by phone or mail, be sure to cover the following:

- Confirm their interest in the position.
- Briefly describe the job.
- Set a date, time, and place for the interview.
- Describe the interview process (e.g., make sure to inform the applicant if panel interview is being used).
- Provide a contact name and phone number.
- Ask: "Do you need any reasonable accommodation in the interview process?"
- If the applicant is a State/Agency promotional candidate, ask: "To ensure that your performance evaluations are considered in our selection process, will you please bring copies of your last two or so written performance evaluations to the interview." (See "What are my responsibilities as a hiring supervisor as a result of the Cerutti decision?" in Appendix D, Frequently Asked Questions).
- Send a confirmation letter (See Model Letters in Appendix C).

CHAPTER 4

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Setting

Ensure a proper setting in which to conduct the interview:

- Choose a quiet, private place, which is comfortable but businesslike.
- Arrange it so you have no interruptions (hold phone calls, etc.).
- Choose a comfortable area to talk -- don't hide behind a desk.

Make sure you have the materials you need for the interview:

- Application and resume.
- Interview Guide (your interview pattern with rating guide/sheet).

Also, have on hand material that may be given to the applicant:

- Information describing the job/department (e.g., organizational chart, job description, benefits information).
- Your business card.

Opening/Rapport Building

The first couple minutes of the interview will set the mood for the rest of the interview. It's important to begin on a positive note. You are responsible for establishing rapport. A positive atmosphere is important because it helps the applicant feel relaxed and at ease to talk – and relaxed applicants reveal more information about themselves.

- Begin with a warm, friendly greeting (smiling, shaking hands) and introduce yourself and the panel members, if applicable.
- Break the ice by discussing something you believe will be of interest to the candidate (e.g., your position, background, hobbies, interests). However, with ice breakers steer clear of interests not generally shared or topics that may be questionable from a legal perspective (e.g., hunting, sports, politics, family, etc).
- Don't overdo it -- not more than 2-3 minutes.

Note Taking

Note taking is essential. Note taking:

- communicates professionalism.
- helps you pay attention and organize your thoughts.
- communicates that what the candidate says is important.
- helps you retain important details so you won't confuse candidates.
- provides a basis for documenting the interview.

When taking notes:

- Don't try to record everything -- just enough to stimulate your recall.
- Listen selectively for answers related to performance to be rated.
- Take descriptive notes -- limit your notes to what the candidate said (even direct quotes) or did. Do not record hunches, preliminary evaluations, value judgements, or otherwise make inappropriate comments.
- If non-job-related information does come out during the interview (e.g., age, family status, etc.), disregard it and do not record it. Your notes can be reviewed as part of adversarial proceedings concerning alleged discrimination in the hiring process so do not write anything down which could prove to be embarrassing or increase the likelihood of a legal judgment against you in such adversarial proceedings.

Notes should describe behavior:

Good

Reported problems with previous employer.

Defends position without being intimidated

Poor

Applicant is a trouble maker.

Fairly assertive for a woman.

Example:

You ask the candidate to describe how he handled an angry client. Your notes might look like this:

Has a system for handling irate clients...good example...let the person talk first and didn't interrupt. When the client began to calm down, asked the client what they would like to have happen....Was able to get to the bottom of the issue...resolved successfully...client apologized...was commended by supervisor.

Structuring

The interview is a meeting, and any good meeting has an agenda. Therefore, it's important to start the interview with a structuring statement outlining the purpose of the interview, as well as the topics to be covered. The structuring statement:

- builds interviewer "control position" (this is your meeting after all!).
- is a courtesy to the applicant by letting him/her know what will happen.
- builds the perception that the interview has been planned and is an important rather than a casual activity, i.e., sets a professional tone.

In addition, a structuring statement will let you:

- indicate that time will be allowed afterward to answer questions the applicant may have.
- indicate that you will be taking notes and "ask permission" to do so (this is a courtesy that helps set a positive tone).

For example:

Shall we get started Judy? As you know, I'm interviewing today for an opening we have for the position of.... Over the next 50 to 60 minutes I'd like to do three things. First, I want to tell you a little more about the position. Next, I want to find out as much about you and your skills for this job as possible. Finally, I'll leave some time at the end to answer any questions you may have. Sounds ok? I hope you won't mind my taking notes during the interview. Since I'll be seeing several candidates, they help me remember exactly what you said. Ready to go?

Provide Information

One of the purposes of the interview is to provide information. In describing the position, provide enough information to allow job candidates to make an intelligent choice. Include both favorable and unfavorable information about the tasks and responsibilities of the job. It is important for the candidate to have a realistic expectation about the job in order to reduce the likelihood of early turnover.

When this is done is a matter of personal preference. Some interviewers like to describe the position as the first "agenda" item, which can help provide a context for the candidate before the questions are asked. Others prefer to do this after asking the interview questions because candidates are often too anxious

before the interview to really pay attention to information about job duties and benefits.

Make sure that you describe the essential functions of the job to all candidates and ask "Can you perform these tasks? (With or without reasonable accommodation)." It's also important to describe any other job requirements, such as scheduled work hours, overtime, travel, etc.

You should use some caution in describing the job opening to applicants. For example, avoid suggesting that the candidate can count on a "long career" with your department.

Probing

In many cases, candidates may give incomplete or non-specific answers to your questions, or their answers may be unclear. Thus, the interviewer may need to prompt or ask follow-up questions in order to get a complete answer. However, only limited probing is recommended. Follow-up questions or probing can be a problem because they reduce the structure and consistency of the interview. Follow-up questions:

- might encourage some candidates to add to or change their answers.
- might lead the candidate toward a specific answer.
- might lead the interviewer away from the structured organization of the interview (e.g., will run out of time and not be able to ask all the prepared questions).

The kind of probing needed varies somewhat with the type of question asked. Experience, self-evaluative and situational questions generally call for simple follow-up probes, if any is needed at all. However, for behavioral questions it is up to the interviewer to gain behavioral examples as most interviewees do not spontaneously refer to specific events.

When probing for complete responses to behavioral questions the recommended technique is to remember "STAR" -- Situation/Task, Action, and Result. These are the components that make up a good behavioral example.

- **Situation/Task** What were the details of the specific situation?
- **Action** What was done to resolve the situation or otherwise respond to the situation?
- **Result** What was the result or outcome?

Here's an example. Your initial question:

Gloria, tell me about a time when you had to work as part of a team, even when the team wasn't getting along all that well. How did you deal with it?

Gloria's response might be too general:

Well, we had two team members who sometimes disagreed on how to get some things done. Sometimes they argued, nothing got done.

You have not gotten a good behavioral example. Remember you need -- Situation, Action, and Result. Use a probe like this:

Gloria, it would help me if you could go into more detail. Think back to a specific situation when those two people were arguing and describe what you did and what was the outcome.

Here's another example. Your initial question:

Bonnie, tell us about a specific time when you had to deal with a particularly difficult client.

Here you get generalities:

We have difficult clients all the time. It can be a real challenge, but I have excellent people skills and I am able to resolve most any situation that comes my way.

Again, you need -- Situation, Action, and Result. Use a probe like this:

Bonnie, I'd like you to tell us about a specific incident when you dealt with a difficult client. Tell us about the situation, exactly what you did and how the situation turned out.

Finally, in some instances in response to a behavioral question an applicant may indicate that he or she "Can't think of anything" or "Nothing comes to mind." In this case, start your probing by repeating or rephrasing the question and acknowledge that it takes some effort to come up with a good example:

Shirley, I know these questions can be difficult. But I want you to think of a time when you dealt with a particularly difficult client and tell us how you handled it.

If the applicant still can't relate a specific incident, be positive but persistent and try another probe. This time give the applicant "permission" to take his/her time

thinking (to remove the immediate pressure):

Shirley, we have plenty of time, I'm sure you can come up with an example....

At this point if the applicant still can't come up with an example, it is probably best to move on to your next question. Interviewers should be especially cautious about interviewees who seem unwilling or unable to answer questions completely. If an applicant cannot recall particularly favorable experiences or if they can recall only unfavorable experiences, they are likely to volunteer little if anything about themselves. One way to misrepresent oneself in the structured behavioral interview is to decline to relate unflattering experiences that come to mind when asked about behavior in past situations.

Controlling

Sometimes an applicant may digress in their response or may start to repeat what they have said already. If the applicant strays too far afield and begins rambling, it is the interviewer's responsibility to bring them back on course. A good way to handle this situation is to acknowledge the applicant's comments and direct the conversation back to the prepared questions. For example:

An applicant is complaining about the disorganization of a previous employer and begins to ramble. Wait for a slight pause, or if necessary just begin speaking and interject something like. *"I understand how that might be frustrating. However, I have several more questions I would like to ask."* Then move on to your next question.

Thus, you can be tactful and still maintain control of the interview, directing it toward the information you need to gather.

Active Listening

Good listening skills are an essential part of the interviewing process.

- Listen -- ACTIVELY. Don't dominate the conversation -- the applicant should speak at least 75% of the time.
- Acknowledge the candidate's answers to maintain rapport, but avoid indicating agreement or disagreement. You can do this by:
 - a nod of your head.
 - regularly re-establishing eye contact.
 - saying "um-hum."

Allowing Silence

Sometimes a candidate will have trouble thinking of a specific example and will sit for a moment or two in silence. Because the silence is uncomfortable, either the interviewer will tend to jump in with "help" (e.g., *I'm looking for an example of...*) or will excuse the candidate (e.g., *Well that's ok, lets move on to my next question....*). Interviewers need to strongly resist doing either.

Allow silence to encourage the candidate to provide more information or think about an answer. Don't hesitate to let the person know that silence is ok, and you don't mind waiting while the person comes up with the best example. This legitimizes the candidate's freeze and removes the immediate pressure, such as:

"Eileen, I realize that sometimes it is difficult to dig up these past examples--so take your time to think about it. I'm sure you can come up with a good example."

Applicant's Questions

The research on interviewing suggests that you should not allow the applicant to ask questions until after the interview. This is because one of the tactics that is advocated by various interviewee preparation (impression management) guides is for interviewees to "turn the interview around" and be the question asker. In this way, the interviewee "takes control" of the interview. Unfortunately, this interferes with your purpose of gathering information from the applicant.

Some questions may be OK, but if you find that the applicant is attempting to "take over" the role of question asker, you need to get back to "the agenda" (see "Structuring" above). Directly, but tactfully, say:

As I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, I will give you ample time at the end of the interview to ask any questions you wish. I'd like to get back to my prepared questions. OK?

Once you have covered all of your prepared questions, then turn the interview over to the applicant:

Thank you Pearlina, you've given me a lot of good information. As I mentioned at the start, you'd have the opportunity to ask questions. I've given you a short overview of the job, but is there anything else that you'd like to ask about?

Respond fully and frankly to all of the applicant's questions, and note any further information that the applicant volunteers that will aid you in making your evaluation.

Closing

How you close the interview is just about as important as how you open it. You need to maintain rapport and leave the candidate with a positive impression.

- Make certain in your closing comments that you do not make any remarks that could be construed that you have already made some decision – either you plan to hire the individual or that you do not.
- Inform the candidate that you will be checking references, and confirm that it is "OK" to do so.
- Inform the candidate when a decision will be made or what the next steps will be. (NOTE: Employers are notorious for responding late to applicants. This causes unnecessary ill will and telephone calls from applicants wanting to know their status. Make a follow-up schedule and stick to it!)
- Conclude with a warm, friendly close, and thank the candidate for his/her time.
- Escort the candidate to the exit or elevator. It takes just a moment, and it adds a touch of professionalism and courtesy that the candidate invariably appreciates and remembers. It is an action that virtually shouts "Here is a considerate supervisor and an organization that's obviously a good place to work."

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATING CANDIDATES

Once the interviews are completed, the difficult task of evaluating the information you have gathered starts.

Steps in Evaluating Candidates

- (1) Shortly after each interview, review your notes (and ratings if you are rating each answer as it is given).
- (2) If you are doing multiple ratings after the interview, do ratings using your rating format, one job requirement at a time.
- (3) When all interviews are done, review all your ratings and reassess if necessary. (The first candidate may look very different after all the interviews are done!)
- (4) If you have been rating each answer as it is given, sum the ratings for questions that relate to a given job requirement so you have overall scores for each job requirement.
- (5) In order to get an overall picture and allow applicant comparisons, put the scores in a summary table. On the next page is an example of a summary table. This type of summary table is particularly useful for panels to compare individual members' ratings.
- (6) Rank the candidates and choose finalist(s).
- (7) Check references of top candidate(s).

Interview Ratings Summary Table

Name	Rater	Job Requirements			Total	Final Score (ave.)
		Interpersonal Skills	Manages Time	Decision Making		
John	DP	5	4	4	13	12
	CC	4	4	3	11	
	JA	5	4	3	12	
Allen	DP	4	4	3	11	9
	CC	3	2	2	7	
	JA	4	2	3	9	
Virginia	DP	3	4	3	10	9
	CC	3	3	3	9	
	JA	3	3	2	8	
Linda	DP	3	4	4	11	12
	CC	4	4	5	13	
	JA	3	4	5	12	

This summary table illustrates a situation where there were four interviewees and a three-person panel rating three job requirements. This type of table is extremely useful in identifying issues for the panel to discuss, illustrating the "strengths and weaknesses" of applicants, and helping to rank candidates to identify the finalist(s).

For example:

- The ratings for Allen on the job requirement "Manages Time" have a wide spread, with "DP" giving him a "4" and the other raters giving him a "2." Differences in ratings of two or more points deserve some discussion among panel members in order to understand the difference in judgments. This may or may not lead to a change in the rating.
- The "final score" (which is an average of each members' rating) shows that we have a "tie" between Linda and John. However, you can see that Linda was rated highly on "Decision Making," while getting rather low ratings for "Interpersonal Communication." On the other hand, John has high ratings for "Interpersonal Communication," but low ratings for "Decision Making." Before making the final decision between John and Linda, the panel will have to resolve this difference, perhaps by other supporting information (e.g., reference checks) or deciding which of the job requirements they consider to be most important.

CHAPTER 6

REFERENCE CHECKING

Before any offer of employment is extended, the hiring supervisor should conduct a reference check on the final candidate(s). Candidates should be notified that a reference check will be done and that the information will be used in making the final hiring decision.

Problems with Reference Checking

Reference checks are typically obtained to confirm details on an application, check for prior discipline problems, discover new information about an applicant, and as a means of predicting success on the new job. While it is critical for a hiring supervisor to check references, the process and the results are problematic. The first problem involves actually being able to obtain reference information, the second problem involves the usefulness of the information obtained.

Obtaining Reference Information

The hiring supervisor is often between a "rock and a hard place" when it comes to reference checks. In many cases, it is difficult to get any information from former employers. As a result of numerous and costly "defamation" lawsuits, many employers, as a matter of policy, will only provide minimal and clearly documented information, such as job title, dates of employment, final salary level, etc. Generally, defamation cases that involve references have resulted when an employer gives negative information about a current or former employee that is either "untrue," inconsistent (e.g., employee had a satisfactory performance evaluation on file but was represented as a subpar employee), or undocumented. In the past several years, many states have passed laws to protect employers who provide good-faith job references for current or former employees (Vermont does not have such a statute).

On the other hand, employers may be held liable for the negligent acts of employees committed within the scope of their employment. Under this legal concept of "negligent hire," the employer has a duty to protect its employees, customers, clients, and visitors from injury caused by employees you know, or "should know" pose a risk of harm to others. The depth and nature of the reference or background investigation should be based on the job being filled. Jobs with a higher degree of unsupervised contact with customers, clients or other employees require a more stringent check of references, particularly regarding the applicant's violent or dangerous tendencies.

How Useful are References?

The second problem with reference checks is the questionable usefulness of the information obtained. The research on reference checks shows that they are generally unreliable and extremely poor at predicting future job success. The lack of reliability that plagues references is a result of the fact that they tend to be inflated, or at least excessively positive. That is, the reference giver tends to emphasize the candidate's good points and down plays (or doesn't say anything about!) the bad ones. Some employers are over-complementary because "he/she was such a nice person and I really want to see him/her do well." Sometimes a current employer may mislead you because they either don't want to lose the employee or they do want the applicant to get another job. You never really know the motivation of the reference source and the accuracy of the information.

In addition, the research is very clear: reference information is very poor at predicting future job success. The best use of reference checks is to screen out people when negative information is discovered (especially falsification or exaggeration of information reported on the job application and in the interview). Thus, the real value of reference checks is to supplement the available information on a candidate so as to minimize "false positives," the hiring of unsatisfactory employees. References are not good at identifying who is best to hire.

Conclusions

We can draw several conclusions from the discussion on the problems with reference checks:

- It is critical to make every attempt to obtain information from references.
- Use references to check the validity of information given on the application or during the interview.
- The extent and degree of the reference/background check must be based on the job and the potential risk of harm or injury to third parties that may arise from hiring an inappropriate candidate.
- Be wary of the accuracy of the information given.
- Reference checks should be used only in a limited way to identify a relatively small proportion of people who should not be considered further for the job
- Do not use reference information as the sole basis for deciding who to hire.

Source of Reference

Your best source of information on any candidate is a former supervisor. On-the-job performance is the most useful predictor of future success. A "personal reference" can seldom give work-related information. The supervisor, on the other hand, can specify job behaviors, reliability, and potential problem areas.

It is recommended that you check with at least two past employers to find consistent trends in the applicant's past performance. Don't necessarily limit yourself to references listed by the applicant; make sure you talk with the most recent employer or those who employed the person in a position most clearly related to your own. Calling several employers will also help balance the information you receive and may guard against making a decision based on an unfounded reference.

Guidelines for Reference Checking

- Check references on only those candidates under serious consideration after final interviews.
- Inform the candidate that you plan to check references and get their verbal "OK" to do so. While the applicant's signature on the State of Vermont application form gives us "permission" to verify any information contained in the application, it is wise, and a courtesy, to ask. If the candidate does not want you to contact a certain employer, you need to explore the reasons with the individual. Depending on the reasons given, you may need to consult with legal counsel.
- Check references by phone, not by mail. Some organizations and people tend to be reluctant about putting less than positive remarks on paper.
- Call most former employers. The most recent employer may not have bad things to say about a candidate, but this isn't to say that previous employers haven't had problems you'd like to hear about. So, call as many of the candidate's former employers as possible.
- Whenever possible try to talk to the applicant's direct supervisor.
- Begin the conversation with a businesslike tone. Be friendly but maintain a strong sense of a professional doing his/her job. Say who you are (name, title, organization), why you are calling (say you are calling to "verify past employment" rather than "requesting a reference"), and move right into your questions. Resist any attempt to refer you to their personnel department unless the supervisor says their policy absolutely forbids giving references.

- Limit your inquiries to verifiable job-related information. It is inappropriate to inquire about areas not related to actual on-the-job performance. These include questions related to hobbies, social activities, religious or political beliefs, marital status, children, residence, medical status or disability, and any past legal actions including workers' compensation claims, civil rights charges and safety complaints (See Appendix A).
- If you check the references of more than one finalist, make sure that you ask the same general questions about each candidate.
- Ensure that reference information is weighted in the same way for all candidates. What disqualifies one candidate should be the basis for disqualifying any applicant.
- If negative information is uncovered, consider its source and check its accuracy with other sources before using it to make a decision about the applicant.
- Assure the person you're speaking with that any information will be shared only with officials involved in the hiring process and not otherwise disclosed.
- Document the information gathered from your reference check(s), noting even those reference requests for which you obtained no information.

Reference Questions/Format

As with other stages of the selection process, it is important that the solicited information relates directly to the applicant's ability to carry out the responsibilities of the job.

Reference Questions

Asking specific job-related questions increases the likelihood of receiving useful data. You should cover the same job requirements you did in the interview.

The most common questions asked, and the ones that are found in most "how to" guides are what would be categorized as "self evaluative" (Recall the discussion of different types of interview questions.). For example, some very commonly recommended questions to ask reference givers:

How well did he/she get along with coworkers?

What were his/her strongest skills as an employee?

How would you describe the quality and quantity of his/her work?

Would you rehire this applicant?

How would you describe his/her work style?

How would you evaluate his/her technical skills?

How would you characterize his/her interpersonal skills?

As you can see, all these questions are very much like the self evaluative-type questions that can be asked of interviewees. As was discussed, this type of question is best used sparingly in the job interview because they are so prone to exaggeration and are “low yield” in terms of being able to predict future job performance.

As we have discussed above, in the reference "interview" it is particularly difficult to get accurate reliable information and the use of self evaluative-type questions may compound this problem. Therefore, you may want to consider using some behavioral questions in your reference interview! You can even adapt some of the very questions you used in the interviews you conducted with the applicants.

For instance, instead of (or in addition to) asking an evaluative question for a job requirement like "interpersonal communication skills" such as:

How would you describe Ramona's interpersonal communication skills?

You might try:

Could you give me an example of an incident where Ramona used her interpersonal communication skills to deal with a difficult or irate person.

Another question that is useful to ask of the present/former supervisor concerns the results of a candidate's performance review. You may want to ask:

Do you do formal performance reviews?

If yes:

Tell me about Pam's most recent performance review.

What was your overall evaluation?

Did she meet your expectations, and in what areas?

Were there areas where she did not meet your expectations?

What issues did you identify for improvement?

Reference Format

To facilitate a uniform, structured approach and create an easy means of record keeping, it is a good idea to develop a reference form. It should include: your name; date; name of applicant; position applied for; name, title and organization of the reference; and the questions you will ask about the applicant. The form should have plenty of room for noting responses to your questions.

As a standard practice, the following areas should be covered:

What were the dates of his/her employment with your organization?

What were his/her job title and primary responsibilities?

What was your relationship to the applicant?

SPECIFIC SKILL/EXPERIENCE QUESTIONS (See above "Reference Questions")

Do you have any knowledge that he/she has ever engaged in any dangerous, violent or abusive conduct at work?

What was the reason for separation of employment? (If applicable)

Was he/she able to meet your attendance and punctuality requirements?

Was he/she ever disciplined or suspended? Could you describe the circumstances surrounding such incidents?

Education Verification

Post high school education should be verified IF the education is required for the job or IF the education was a major factor in selecting the individual as a finalist. Normally this is done only for the final candidate(s).

- Contact the school's Registrar's Office or Office of Student Records (the most common names used).
- Provide them with the candidate's name (some may ask for Social Security Number), and ask them to verify the education claimed. For example, "Tom Student indicated he received a master's degree in accounting in 1995. Can you confirm this?"
- Generally, schools will not answer the question, "How many credit hours does Tom Student have?"

Criminal Record Search

As was mentioned earlier, jobs with a higher degree of unsupervised contact with an employer's customers, clients or other employees require a more stringent background check. Tailor the investigation to the specific job requirements. If doing a criminal record or other more detailed background investigation, ask the applicant to sign an authorization and waiver of any

claims resulting from the investigation (see your legal counsel). Currently in Vermont, criminal record searches for purposes of employment can only be conducted for particular job types specifically authorized by statute. Check with your legal counsel to see if a job you are filling is covered by such a statute. The Vermont Criminal Information Center conducts in-state criminal record checks for a nominal fee.

It is advisable to perform a criminal record search before hiring any applicant for a job that requires entry into either client or customers' homes or businesses (such as service technicians or social workers), entrustment of customers or clients into the custody of employees (such as child-care workers, correctional officers, teachers or counselors), or handling a weapon (law enforcement officer).

Whenever an applicant lists a criminal conviction on the employment application, follow up with the applicant to determine the nature and dates of the conviction, and, if possible, conduct a criminal record search to confirm this information. Before hiring an applicant with a criminal record, consult with legal counsel to determine the candidate's fitness for the job in question, in light of the conviction.

CHAPTER 7

MAKING THE DECISION

Once references have been checked, then it is a matter of synthesizing all your information and making a final decision. There is no easy recipe for making a hiring decision. The interviewer or interview panel must use the data gathered and use sound judgment:

- Be certain that your decision to hire is based entirely on job-related information.
- Have a good reason for hiring the person you do (and not a bad reason for not hiring someone else).
- Be prepared to explain how you came to your decision.

You can teach a turkey to climb a tree, but it's a heck of a lot easier to hire a squirrel.

- Unknown

Once a selection has been made (and the offer accepted):

- Notify your personnel officer immediately.
- Put your offer of employment to the successful applicant in writing (see "Model Letters" in Appendix C).
- Send letters to ALL individuals listed on your hiring certificate (see "Notification" below).
- Code your hiring certificate and return it to the Department of Personnel (through your personnel officer).

Notification

According to Department of Personnel Policy (Number 4.11), the hiring supervisor must notify all applicants listed on the hiring certificate of the resolution of your hiring process. Those not selected for interview must be so notified. Those interviewed and not offered the position must also be notified that another selection has been made (see "Model Letters" in Appendix C).

The letter needs to be well-written, professional in appearance and above all personal. Fill-in-the-blank form letters and tersely worded postcards are ill-advised. Put yourself in the shoes of the person who will receive your letter and ask yourself, "Did it make me feel I was treated courteously, professionally, and as an individual?"

Rarely do the results of your interview process lead you to the one "perfect" candidate. Invariably it comes down to a tough choice between two (or more) people with different strengths. The cardinal rule here is to have a good (job-related) reason for hiring the person you do. Don't be caught in the trap of explaining why you didn't hire someone else -- speak from the positive, talk about the positive attributes that make your choice the best one.

APPENDIX A

PRE-EMPLOYMENT INQUIRIES

Following is guide to acceptable and unacceptable pre-employment inquiries. **This is only a guide and is not a comprehensive list of "illegal" questions.**

Topic	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Name	<p>Other names under which the applicant has worked in order to check education or employment records or references.</p> <p><i>Do we need any additional information about the possible use of another name to check your previous employment?</i></p>	<p>Inquiries about the name which would indicate applicant's marital status, ancestry or national origin. Inquiry into previous name of applicant where it has been changed by court order or otherwise.</p> <p><i>Have you ever legally changed your name? What was your original name? What was your maiden name? Do you go by Ms., Miss or Mrs.? That's an interesting name, what nationality is that?</i></p>
Age	<p>If a minor, may require that applicant state his/her age and submit proof in the form of a certificate of age or work permit.</p> <p><i>Do you have a high school diploma or equivalent?</i></p>	<p>Age of applicant (except for individuals who appear to be minors). Any inquiry that would indicate age of applicant.</p> <p><i>When do you plan to retire? How old are you? When were you born? When did you graduate from high school?</i></p>
Sex	<p>None, unless a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ), and then must be asked on a uniform basis. Consulting with legal counsel is essential before establishing a BFOQ.</p>	<p>Sex of applicant. Any other inquiry that would indicate sex.</p> <p><i>Are you expecting? Are you pregnant?</i></p>
Height and Weight	<p>None, unless a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ), and then must be asked on a uniform basis. Consulting with legal counsel is essential before establishing a BFOQ.</p>	

Topic	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Marital or Family Status	<p>None. You may ask male <u>and</u> female applicants if they are able to meet attendance or other job-related requirements.</p> <p><i>Our regular work schedule is 7:45 to 4:30, Monday through Friday. Would you be able to meet this requirement?</i></p> <p><i>This job requires overnight travel four to five times a month. Would you be able and willing to travel as needed on this job? (if a requirement, should be asked of all applicants).</i></p> <p><i>Would you be able and willing to work overtime as necessary? (if a requirement, should be asked of all applicants).</i></p>	<p>Inquiries that would indicate applicant's marital or family status.</p> <p><i>What is your marital status?</i> <i>Do you intend to get married soon?</i> <i>Are you divorced?</i> <i>Are you a single parent?</i> <i>Can you travel?</i> <i>How many people live in your household?</i> <i>What is your spouse's name?</i> <i>Where does your spouse work?</i> <i>How many children do you have?</i> <i>Do you plan to have children?</i> <i>What day care provisions have you made?</i> <i>Are you working just to earn extra income?</i> <i>What would you do if your spouse gets a job in another state?</i></p>
Disability	<p>Inquiries regarding applicant's ability to perform essential job-related functions.</p> <p>Statement by employer that offer of employment may be made contingent upon passing a physical examination.</p> <p><i>A mail clerk must receive incoming boxes of supplies up to 50 pounds in weight and place them on storage shelves up to six feet in height. Can you perform these tasks?</i></p> <p><i>How many days were you absent last year?</i></p>	<p>Prior to conditional offer of employment, questions about the applicant's disability or about nature or severity of disability. Questions about an applicants worker's compensation history or medical data.</p> <p><i>Do you have any health problems?</i> <i>Are you in good physical condition?</i> <i>Can you read small print?</i> <i>Do you have any back problems?</i> <i>How much alcohol do you drink each week?</i> <i>What prescription drugs are you taking?</i> <i>Have you ever been addicted to drugs?</i> <i>Have you ever been treated for mental health problems?</i> <i>Do you have AIDS or are you HIV-positive?</i> <i>Have you ever filed for workers' compensation?</i> <i>Have you had any prior work injuries?</i> <i>How many days were you out sick last year?</i></p>
Race or Color	None.	Applicant's race. Color of applicant's skin, eyes, hair or other questions directly or indirectly indicating race or color.

Topic	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Religion	<p>An applicant may be advised concerning normal work hours and days of work required by job to avoid possible conflict with religious or other personal convictions.</p>	<p>Any inquiry into religion, religious beliefs or practices.</p> <p><i>Can you work on Saturdays or Sundays?</i> <i>What is your religion?</i> <i>What is the name of your pastor, minister or rabbi?</i> <i>What religious holidays do you observe?</i> <i>Do you consider yourself a good Christian?</i> <i>Is that a Jewish-sounding name?</i> <i>Is there any day of the week you're not able to work?</i></p> <p>Applicants may not be told that employees are required to work on religious holidays that are observed as days of complete prayer by members of their specific faith.</p>
Citizenship, National Origin or Ancestry	<p>Statement that proof of right to work in U.S. will be required upon employment.</p> <p>If job-related: <i>What language(s) do you read, speak or write fluently?</i></p>	<p>Any inquiry that would indicate applicant's citizenship, national origin or ancestry.</p> <p><i>Are you a U.S. citizen?</i> <i>Where were you born?</i> <i>What's your nationality?</i> <i>Are your parents naturalized or native born U.S. citizens?</i> <i>Are you bilingual?</i> <i>What's the origin of your name?</i> <i>What language do you speak at home?</i></p>
Arrests and Convictions	<p>You may ask about convictions, but not arrests. Further, (1) a conviction should not be an automatic bar to employment, all the circumstances in the case should be considered; and (2) convictions which have been expunged from the applicant's record or for which he/she has been pardoned, should not be considered.</p>	<p>Any inquires about arrests.</p> <p><i>Have you ever been <u>arrested</u>?</i> <i>Have you ever been charged with any crime?</i></p>

Topic	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Education	Any inquiry regarding education, schools attended, licenses/certificates and degrees related to the job sought.	Any inquiry asking specifically the nationality, racial or religious affiliation of a school.
Experience	Any inquiry regarding work or other experience related to the job sought.	
Military Service	<p>Military experience and duties performed while serving in the Armed Forces of the United States.</p> <p><i>In what branch of the Armed Forces did you serve?</i></p> <p><i>How long did you serve?</i></p> <p><i>What was your rank at time of discharge?</i></p> <p><i>Were you discharged under honorable or other acceptable conditions?</i></p> <p><i>What type of training, education or work experience did you receive in the military.</i></p>	<p>Inquiry into type of discharge. Inquiry into military service for foreign countries.</p> <p><i>Were you honorably discharged?</i></p> <p><i>Did you ever serve in the armed forces of another country?</i></p>
Financial Status	<p>Rate of pay at previous employer(s).</p> <p><i>What were your wages at your prior job?</i></p>	<p>Applicant's credit record (charge accounts, bankruptcy history, garnishments, failure to be bonded or loans outstanding); whether applicant rents or owns a home; car ownership.</p> <p><i>Do you own a car?</i></p> <p><i>How will you get to work?</i></p> <p><i>Have you had any personal, domestic or financial problems that interfered with your work?</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever been on welfare?</i></p> <p><i>Do you have any loans outstanding?</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever had your wages garnished?</i></p>
Organizations	<p>Inquiry into organizational memberships or offices held in a professional, trade or service organizations related to the job.</p> <p><i>List any professional, trade or service organization in which you are a member.</i></p>	<p>Inquiry into membership in clubs, social fraternities, societies, lodges or other organizations which indicate the race, creed, color, religion or national origin of its members; union membership.</p> <p><i>List all organizations to which you belong.</i></p> <p><i>Were you ever a union member?</i></p> <p><i>Are you for or against unions?</i></p>

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS

Tell me about a time when you made a decision or solved a problem which required a lot of hard thinking and careful analysis on your part.

Tell me about a time when you came up with an especially creative solution to a problem.

Tell me about the most difficult writing project you have handled.

How do you react to criticism? Tell me about the last time you were criticized at work.

Tell me about a situation where you had to "stand up" for a decision you made, even though it made you unpopular.

Give us a specific example of a time when you motivated coworkers.

Tell me about a time when your carefully laid plans were fouled up. What happened? How did you react?

Describe the highest pressure situation you have been under in the last year.

Give us a detailed example of what you do on your current job to organize yourself.

Tell us about a specific time you helped out a coworker without being asked.

Describe a situation where you had to defend or justify to someone a decision you made.

Tell us about the time you were most successful in leading a group toward accomplishing an important goal.

Tell us about a specific leadership experience you have had that would illustrate for us what your "leadership style" is like.

Tell me about a time when you felt most satisfied about something you accomplished at work.

Sometimes the best way to learn is from our mistakes. Tell us about the mistake you made that you learned the most from.

Tell us about a time when you had to convince a coworker or a supervisor to accept your solution to a problem.

Tell us about the last time you undertook a project that demanded a lot of initiative.

What was the best idea you had for improving the way things were done on your last job?

Handling conflict between yourself and your staff is a part of any manager's job. Tell us about the most challenging conflict situation you faced and how you handled it.

Tell us about a time when you felt it was necessary to talk to an employee about the need for improvement in his or her performance.

It is often necessary to work together in a group to accomplish a task. Can you tell us about the most recent experience you had working as part of a group.

When a group of people work closely together, it is inevitable that conflicts will arise. Tell me about the most serious disagreement you have had with a co-worker.

It's impossible to please someone all the time. Tell us about the most serious disagreement you had with your supervisor over some aspect of your work.

Sometimes members of the public or clients can be very frustrating. Tell us about the most frustrating time you faced with a member of the public or client and how you handled it.

It is often difficult to keep track of all the new technical developments in our field. Can you think of some work you completed recently where you applied a new technique to solve a practical problem.

It can be difficult to get a new idea accepted by others. Can you tell us about a time when you had to do this.

APPENDIX C

MODEL LETTERS

MODEL LETTER -- CONFIRMATION

Dear Ms. Doe:

We are looking forward to interviewing you for the position of xxxxxx xxxxxxxx with our department.

Your panel interview is scheduled for 10:00 a.m. on Monday, June xx, 20xx, in the first floor meeting room at 135 North Second Avenue. [information about parking, if appropriate]. The interview should last about an hour.

If you have any questions, or if you require reasonable accommodation in the interview process, please call me at 999-5678.

Sincerely yours,

MODEL LETTER -- APPLICANTS YOU DON'T INTERVIEW

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you for applying for the position of xxxxxx xxxxxxxx in our department.

We have had the opportunity to carefully review your application. It has been difficult to choose from the many excellent candidates who applied. While we were impressed with your qualifications and experience, we have decided to limit our interviews to those applicants whose experience and training most closely fit the specific requirements of this position.

Thank you again for your application. We wish you well in your career and hope that you will be able to locate a position that can take advantage of your particular skills.

Sincerely yours,

MODEL LETTER -- APPLICANTS YOU INTERVIEW

Dear Ms Jones:

I wish to express my appreciation for the interest you have shown in the position of xxxxxx xxxxxxxx in our department.

We enjoyed having the opportunity to meet you and discuss your qualifications for this position. It has been difficult to choose from among the several excellent applicants who we interviewed. While we were impressed with your qualifications and experience, we have decided to hire an individual whose background and expertise more closely matches the specific requirements of this position. (If appropriate, try to be more precise with what specific experience or expertise the selected applicant had).

Thank you again for your application. We wish you well in your career and hope that you will be able to locate a position that can take advantage of your particular skills.

Sincerely yours,

SAMPLE LETTER - OFFER OF EMPLOYMENT

Dear Ms. Doe:

Congratulations! We are looking forward to welcoming you as a member of our staff.

This will confirm that on this date I offered and you accepted the position of (insert job title) (insert position number), that you interviewed for on (insert date). This is a permanent position under the State of Vermont classified system. This position is a pay grade (insert grade) and starts at (insert wage) per hour. You will receive an orientation package once you begin employment that will more fully explain all of the benefits of State employment.

As we discussed, you are to report for work on (insert date) at (insert time).

Your supervisor will be (insert name) whom you met during the interview. If you have any questions between now and your start date, please feel free to call either your supervisor or myself.

Sincerely,

Appointing Authority

cc: (supervisor)
(personnel officer)

APPENDIX D

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

I know that behavior description questions are the "best" type of questions to use in an interview. But what do applicants think of them?

Behavior description questions are the most challenging for applicants to answer, and they are the hardest to exaggerate or fake. Interestingly, research has shown extremely positive reactions among applicants to structured interviews using behavioral questions, and to the organization conducting such interviews. Some of the reasons cited are that such interviews are clearly job-related, well prepared, and thorough. Applicants who may be lukewarm initially get quite excited about working for an organization that obviously knows what it is looking for and goes after that information in a business-like fashion. Highly qualified applicants seem to particularly like behavioral questions because they have lots of examples of effective behavior to share!

An applicant who we interviewed but did not select for the job called me. He wanted to know the specific reasons why he didn't get the job. How do I respond and how much should I tell him?

This is never an easy situation. You want to do your best to respond in a manner that promotes a perception of fairness, so as to reduce the likelihood of a formal complaint from this unsuccessful applicant. On the other hand, you are not obligated to tell the applicant anything.

Probably the best strategy is to explain in general terms the factors that were used (job requirements) in the interview and indicate that all candidates were asked the same set of interview questions. Further, explain that the interview panel evaluated the information gathered during the interviews and came to a consensus that another candidate had stronger qualifications. If you can (and wish to), provide concrete examples of what the successful candidate had (e.g., selected candidate had "this [specific education]" or "had this [focused] experience," all the better. Tell the applicant that making a hiring decision is never easy and you can understand this person's disappointment, but that the panel felt it made a fair decision based on the information it had. Keep your explanation clear and straightforward. Don't stretch the truth. Remember, anything you say you may have to defend.

You should not identify or discuss other applicants and you do not need to tell them exactly how they "scored," or produce rating sheets or other documentation (e.g., notes) from the interview process.

We want to pay a top applicant for her travel to the interview. Is that ok?

Review Agency of Administration Bulletin 3.4 (and talk to your department head). A Department head can authorize reimbursement of interview expenses up to \$1,000.00 per candidate in "instances where extreme recruiting difficulty is encountered due to lack of qualified applicants." Expenses in excess of \$1,000.00 per interview must have prior approval of the Commissioner of Personnel.

Is it a good idea to give applicants a copy of the interview questions in advance of the interview?

In most cases, it is not recommended. While it might seem reasonable that this would give applicants a chance to start thinking about their responses, unfortunately this greatly increases the likelihood that some candidates will use this opportunity to concoct and rehearse exaggerated or faked responses. One exception is when fairly complicated situational type questions are used. Here you might provide the candidates with background material or a lengthy scenario and ask that they prepare a response or presentation for the interview.

What are my responsibilities as a hiring supervisor as a result of the Cerutti decision?

In the 1998 *Cerutti* decision, the Vermont Labor Relations Board interpreted the *Personnel Rules & Regulations* as giving state employees the right to have their written performance evaluations taken into consideration in the promotional process. In light of this decision, the recommended procedure is for hiring supervisors to request that the candidate bring copies of their evaluation(s) to the interview. Specifically, when contacting state/agency promotional candidates chosen for interview, notify them that "to ensure that your performance evaluations are considered in our selection process, please bring copies of your last two or so written performance evaluations to the interview."

The evaluation(s) should be considered in the selection process. Of course, the relevance of, and the weight given to, any evaluation will depend on the extent to which it bears on the capacity of the individual for the particular job being filled.

What do I do if a candidate requests a "reasonable accommodation"?

A qualified job candidate may request reasonable accommodation to participate in the job interview, which you should anticipate and be prepared to provide. Reasonable accommodations for interviews may include:

- An accessible location for people with mobility impairments.
- An interpreter for a hearing impaired person.

If requested, you are obligated to provide the reasonable accommodation (at your department's expense). NEVER hesitate or indicate that you've "changed your mind" about the interview offer because of a request for reasonable accommodation. Contact your personnel officer, or the Employee Relations Division of the Department of Personnel, if you have any questions about a reasonable accommodation request.

Shouldn't I ask for at least three letters of recommendation?

Don't bother. Letters of recommendation are basically useless. Normally, this type of letter will give a glowing account of the applicant's past performance because only those individuals who are guaranteed to write a good reference are asked to do so. Occasionally, it is the applicant who writes the letter!

We have a promising applicant who lives out-of-state. Is a phone interview a good alternative?

Yes, it is. An out-of-state candidate may be quite reluctant to spend the money to travel for a "first round" interview where there is great uncertainty about how competitive he or she is. Some supervisors are reluctant to do phone interviews, perhaps because they over-emphasize the "face to face" nature of the process. However, if one focuses on the information gathering purpose of the interview, it can be conducted just like the other candidates, except on the speaker phone. If the candidate does end up being a "finalist," then it is important to hold a second round, in-person interview. At this point the candidate is more apt to spend the money (or your Department may be more willing to pay some travel expenses).

Some of the applicants on my hiring certificate are really "overqualified." How do I deal with this?

Very carefully. Declaring an applicant "overqualified" is often seen as a code word for discrimination against older applicants. However, it is not unreasonable for an employer to be concerned that an overqualified candidate may be unhappy or bored, leave the job early or have problems in relationships with coworkers and supervisors. This is why it is so important to have some basis for deciding who is the best "fit" for your job. This is accomplished through your job analysis and identification of job requirements. It may be that an applicant with education or experience (either type or level) far in excess of what is actually required (job requirements) would not be a good fit with the particular job, but you must be prepared to show that this is based on the actual requirements of the job and is not a "disguised" form of age discrimination.

Is it OK for me to "test" the candidates' ability to perform a part of the job?

For some jobs, a work sample "test" can be a valuable part of your interview process. For example, in a secretarial job an important function might be keyboarding a document from a hand written copy, proofing and editing it, and producing a final document. As a work sample, you might have your candidates perform this task and evaluate the results. You can then use these results as one part of your overall evaluation process. Another example would be presentation skills that would be critical for a job as a trainer. You could provide your candidates with materials in advance of the interview and ask that they prepare a brief presentation to be done during the interview. Your evaluation of the candidates' preparation and presentation skills can be used in your overall evaluation.

A couple of words of caution about using a work sample. First, you must administer the work sample in a consistent manner to all your candidates. Second, you should agree on how the work sample will be evaluated in advance and again this must be done in a consistent manner to all your candidates. Finally, and most important, such a test must be clearly job-related, truly a sample of work that is actually performed on that job.

Any use of tests other than work samples, such as written aptitude, ability, job knowledge or personality tests should not be used without technical advice from the Department of Personnel, Recruitment Services Division.

I have a candidate who checked "YES" for the question on the job application asking: "Do you have any relative, any domestic partner, or any other person(s) residing with you, who is employed by the State of Vermont?" What do I do?

You need to refer to Department of Personnel Policy Number 5.2, Conflicts of Interest Arising From Employment. Hiring supervisors must ask prospective candidates if they have any relatives or domestic partners currently working for the State of Vermont (even if they checked "NO" to the question on the job application). It is the general policy of the State that no relatives, domestic partners, or persons residing with employees will be employed in the same department, institution or organizational unit, so if the candidate checked (or later indicates) "YES" you need to follow up. If the relative, domestic partner or roommate is not employed in your department, then there shouldn't be any conflict with the State's policy. However, if the individual is in the same department, then you need to contact your personnel officer or the Employee Relations Division of the Department of Personnel for a "next step" analysis..

How long should I keep records of the selection process for my vacancy?

Documentation of your interview process is essential. This documentation can be reviewed during investigations of complaints. An absence of records can be considered an attempt to hide derogatory information concerning the hiring process. Therefore, it is advisable that the following records be retained in relation to the interview process for a minimum of three (3) years: (1) the list of essential duties and job requirements; (2) what factors were used to select those applicants interviewed (if not all applicants are interviewed); (3) the interview questions asked of applicants; (4) the interviewer(s)' observations/notes; and (5) what evaluation system was used and its results; and (6) a copy of the hiring certificate, if applicable, and (7) copies of candidates' application materials.