The Short Course on Screening Protocol Design
By Linda Graff

Screening is an extremely complex topic. Let me offer some of what I think of as the 'big ideas" about screening.

It is an important risk management tool as well as an essential human resources management function. The thoroughness of the screening process should vary by the risks and demands of the position. How we screen a receptionist in a crisis centre will be very different from, and probably less intensive than how we screen the telephone crisis counsellors in the same organisation.

Hence, screening varies in both type and degree by position, and screening protocol design must rest firmly on a comprehensive assessment of each position. All of this applies equally to paid and unpaid positions.

To determine how you should screen - which devices to use and how to use them - start with a close look at the work the candidates will do. Update the job description and be sure it's comprehensive, including factors such as leadership, communication abilities, willingness to accept direction and supervision, ability to work independently, etc. List any minimum qualifications but be careful not to set the bar higher than it need be. You don't want to chase off candidates that could be great volunteers with a bit of training or skill enhancement.

When the position description is updated, review the position from the perspective of screening requirements. For example, ask questions such as:
- Are these positions of trust?
- Where are the risks?
- Where are the liabilities?
- Where/how can volunteers get themselves, others, the organisation in harm's way?

Because screening is fallible, costly, cumbersome and, at times, off-putting, it is advisable to reduce risks in every position as the first line of defence, then screen to whatever degree of risk remains. For example, rather than trying to screen extremely intensely for a position that gives adults unsupervised access to children in isolated settings, consider how the risks might be mitigated first, e.g., have volunteers work in pairs, have volunteers work with more than one child at a time, engage parents as co-workers with volunteers, have the work take place where supervision is available, etc. So the sequence is as follows: position development, position-related risk/demand assessment, risk reduction and control, then screening protocol design.

Determine what do you need to know about candidates to make an effective screening decision, e.g., skills, knowledge, experience, ability to work alone, leadership, capacity to handle stress, trustworthiness, history of criminal offences, strength, endurance, self-awareness, good judgement, reliability, education, licence, presentation style, language capacity, communication skills, honesty, hidden agendas, etc.

When you know what you need to know, ask yourself where you find that information. Who could give you feedback on the specific things you need to know about.

Organisations have a multitude of screening information sources available to them, e.g., written application form, resume, interview(s), reference checks, performance assessments, criminal record checks (often different levels of thoroughness are available - research how these work in your area), child abuse registry check (if available), qualifications check (including verification of licence currency), name search, verification of employment history and other details provided by candidate, etc. The complexity of screening protocol design is in making the right choices from among the wide range of options.

Give some thought to what you will do with the information you collect. Are certain characteristics, offences, weaknesses, etc. that would be automatic disqualifiers? Is a minor offence from many years ago of relevance to the position in question? What if one referee is hesitant to recommend acceptance while others have given "glowing" references and everything else seems fine? What if your gut instinct suggests something is "off" about this candidate?

Check the applicability of all legislation in your area. Does human rights and/or any employment related legislation cover volunteer work? What constraints might be imposed on what and how you document your screening activities by privacy legislation? Even if the legislation does not apply, would it be the right thing to do to act as if it does apply? Base your inquiries solidly on the requirements of the position. Do not ask about characteristics that have no relevance to what the candidate will do for you. Legal advice on what you have prepared may be advisable and set all of the above in policy and ensure compliance with any pertinent legislation.

Keep in mind that while there are some people with ill-intent who may target your organisation as an easy way to get access to vulnerable people, privileged information, or money or other valuables, the odds are that more trouble will arise from good people in the wrong positions than from people deliberately seeking to do harm. Do not forget the importance of achieving the right match between the candidate and the position requirements in your efforts to identify potentially harmful candidates.

Recognize that screening is terribly unreliable. It's easy to slip through even thorough screening processes. People change their names, obtain pardons, commit crimes for which they are not detected. Never believe that risks are well-managed just by thorough screening. Back up your screening process with appropriately thorough training, and ongoing supervision, performance monitoring, and program evaluation as the work requires.

In most places there are no absolute standards about screening protocol. With the notable exception of children's services around which some funders/ governments require certain minimum screening standards, it is extremely difficult to know with any assurance just how thorough you need to be. Every organisation must consider its own culture, values, client population, work environment, position duties ... and match those up against the organisations tolerance for risk and liability, and the value it places on safety. Some organisations, by their nature, must accept the inevitability of significant risk in mission attainment, e.g., fire fighting, lifesaving, disaster response, etc. Other organisations will recognize that significant risk is inherent in the very nature of the relationships they create (e.g., mentoring, companionship & friendly visiting, counselling, etc.) and that no screening process will guarantee trustworthiness. Still, for these organisations, the benefits of the work outweigh the risks arising from the work.

Balancing risks and benefits is another important step in screening process design, and every organisation must find its own balance.

Approval of the screening policy and process should be sought from the highest levels of the organisation - ideally the board. That gives screening staff clear direction about what is expected and helps to ensure that the organisation will stand behind the staff if/when the screening process fails.

Since there are no absolute "right" screening designs that fit all organisations, the above process will help organisations to determine what is right for them. Keep in mind, however, that due diligence is often established, at least in part, by what the industry standard is at any given point. So be sure to stay current with the literature, and check (and keep checking periodically) with other organisations like yours across your country, and with other organisations in your local area. Find out what their screening process is for positions like those in your organisation. It is a strategic error to assume that your screening process can be designed in isolation from what the rest of your community is doing since standards are increasing across the voluntary sector as well as in the courts and the court of public opinion. When decisions have been made about screening, and the process outlined in, and approved as, policy, you've just begun the larger process of risk management.

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