

Screening

Sourced from: AI Group (2007) A guide to Managing the First 100 Days of an Apprenticeship, p21-24.

Choosing the wrong candidate is expensive for the organisation and disruptive and disappointing for the young person. There is a clear cost-benefit for the organisation in committing the time and resources to getting their recruitment and selection processes right.

Screening processes for new apprentices should include aptitude testing together with written application reviews, interviews and reference checking.

The following are some general guidelines for the recruitment and selection process:

- Establish a recruitment process that is fair, open and relevant to the apprentice;
- Determine the key competencies of the role to be filled by an apprentice;
- Use a proven, practical method of selecting the best candidate;
- Prepare interview questions to gain the best understanding of each candidate;
- Demonstrate and practice interviewing techniques to finding the right apprentice.

Aptitude testing

Aptitude tests are usually only one part of the overall assessment procedure. They are an important tool to be used to develop a shortlist of candidates and to understand the basic skills and orientations of those candidates.

Mechanical reasoning tests are the main aptitude tests used for apprentices in the traditional trades. The test assesses the candidate's understanding of the very basic principles of physics and mechanics, ability to visualise the movement of objects through space, and his/her understanding of the cause-and-effect relationships between mechanical components.

The test covers a wide range of content including wheels, gears, clamps, levers, sliding rods, shafts, pulleys, weights, conveyor belts, fixed and non-fixed pivots, and springs.

Meeting expectations

It is important that skilled recruitment staff take the lead in interviews to ensure that their expectations of the successful candidate are clearly communicated and that the candidate's expectations are aligned with their own. For example, a candidate who is seeking a role involving high levels of creativity will not be happy for long in a position which is highly repetitive and predictable. Similarly, a young person who has always dreamed of being a pilot is unlikely to be satisfied in the longer term with an apprenticeship which has them working on aircraft maintenance – even though in the short term they may be attracted to the idea of working close to aircraft.

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Recruitment panel

A team interviewing approach produces more reliable results than relying on the findings of a single interviewer. Ideally there should be no more than three people on the interview panel. Exactly who should be on the panel will in some cases be determined by the size of the company. For smaller companies it is recommended that the most senior staff member chairs the panel and the immediate supervisor is also involved. There can be value in also including an appropriately qualified and experienced co-worker that interacts closely with the person in the position being filled.

There is no 'correct' number of interviews to hold. Some employers hold as many as three interviews:

- A screening interview to determine basic suitability. In many cases, this first interview is conducted over the telephone;
- A preliminary interview of a short-list of suitable candidates; and
- A final interview with the full selection panel, which should include the tradesperson who will be supervising the apprentice.

The recruitment panel need to ensure speedy communication with the applicants post interview. This will keep prospective apprentices up to date of where they stand in the interview process.

Companies may also benefit from involving a professional recruiter on the selection panel. Group training companies can be engaged to provide an independent, external perspective to the decision process.

Preparing the applicant

The panel should recognise the time and effort each applicant puts into written submissions as well as the preparation involved in the initial screening process, and the preliminary and final interview.

Employers need to be mindful that most people applying for apprenticeships have limited experience in job interviews. For many applicants, it may be their first interview after leaving school and it is important that overall this is a positive experience for them – even if they are not successful in this instance.

A panel approach can be particularly daunting for young candidates who, if they are not alerted in advance, can become very agitated during the interview.

- It is common courtesy to provide the names and titles of who will be on the interview panel to each applicant at the time the interview is being arranged.
- In addition, candidates should be provided with details of when, where and, if necessary, how to get to the interview
- Encourage the applicant to ask any questions they may have about the position, and provide some guidance on how to prepare. Young applicants in particular should be encouraged to find out about the employer or workplace, trade or industry.

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Traditional interviewing

Typically a traditional interview starts with the chair of the panel providing some background on the company and then some information about the particular position he/she wants to fill. Usually the first question to the interviewee will be a very general, open-ended question to help put the candidate at ease, such as

'Tell us a bit about yourself'.

Other traditional interview questions include:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Why are you interested in working for us?
- How would you describe yourself?
- What do you expect to be doing in three years?
- What did you like most/least about school?

Of course, the interview panel is looking for as close a match as possible between the candidate's responses and the company's specifications. The best way to ascertain this is through asking good questions, listening carefully to the responses and then asking follow-up questions to pick up on points which may be of interest but need further elaboration.

Behavioural interviewing

Behavioural interviewing is based on the premise that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. This means finding out how candidates have behaved in similar situations to those they will face in the new job to ascertain how well they are likely to handle the job and the workplace. This technique is generally considered more effective than just relying on responses to traditional questions.

Companies that invest the time and energy in developing behavioural interviews often attract top candidates. This technique can be useful in screening applicants' abilities in the following areas:

- decision making;
- problem solving;
- leadership;
- motivation;
- communication;
- interpersonal skills;
- planning and organisation.

For example, the following are some sample questions that can be used to assess interpersonal and 'people' skills:

- Describe a situation when you were able to have a positive influence on the action of others.
- Have you ever had difficulty getting others to accept your ideas? What was your approach? Did it work?
- Have you ever had to 'sell' an idea to your classmates, colleagues, team or group? How did you do it? Did they 'buy' it?
- How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?

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Behavioural interview questions such as those outlined above should also be adapted to the unique behavioural characteristics of traditional trade apprenticeship roles, such as being mechanically minded, methodical, and capable of paying close attention to detail. Try to develop questions which explore these aspects of applicants' past behaviour.

Outlining wages at the interview

Information on wages, how they will be paid and any other incentives should be provided to applicants in clear written form at the interview for them to take away with them. This is important because candidates will not necessarily remember the salary if it is simply mentioned in passing. It is important to encourage the applicant to give careful consideration to how they will live on a training wage for the period of the apprenticeship.

Many employers choose to pay above the stipulated minimum wage to ensure that they:

- attract the best candidates when recruiting;
- retain their apprentices for the full term of the apprenticeship;
- retain their apprentices' services after the completion of the training period.

Employers should also explain at the interview any other benefits or requirements such as leave entitlements, allowances, superannuation, workers' compensation and where internal company policies can be viewed. It is important that applicants understand that employers will treat them the same as all other workers.

Interviewing minors (under 18 years of age)

Under Australian Law, any child or adolescent below the age of 18 is a minor. The approach with minors is the responsibility of the employer managing the appointment. Parents/legal guardians do not have to give their consent for the young person to be interviewed if the employer is confident the young person understands the application process. If there is any doubt in the employer's mind about the level of understanding, the employer would be well advised to obtain the consent of a parent/legal guardian. It is often helpful if an appropriate adult attends the interview.

Selection

Short-list criteria

Criteria must be developed for the purpose of short-listing candidates, preferably in consultation with the other interview panel members. In developing the criteria it is important to remember that candidates will need to be able to demonstrate how they meet those criteria in a written application. As some attributes cannot be demonstrated in this format, it is best to explore them at another stage in the selection process, such as at interview. Appropriate shortlist criteria might include:

- Minimum educational requirements;
- Related work/volunteer experience;
- Technical skills;
- Written communication skills;
- Evidence of teamwork abilities;
- Understanding of policies and procedures.

Judgement

Whilst careful selection methods and criteria add significantly to the integrity and effectiveness of the selection process, in the end the employer's decision will always involve a degree of subjectivity. Indeed, selection is not a science and there is no absolute 'right' way of going about selecting a new staff member. You can only methodically work through all the steps and make your decision on the balance of the information you have gained.

With practice and experience it will become evident how consistently you are achieving a close match between your candidates' competencies and attitude and those required for the job. Remember that, if the Interview Panel does not feel they have a good fit, then the appointment should not be made.

Pre-employment medical testing

Pre-employment medical tests can be a useful component of the selection process for jobs that require certain physical or mental attributes. It is best to only test people who meet all the other requirements of the job. Employers should test everyone regardless of age, experience etc. It is important that all apprentices in traditional trades are tested. Age or experience is not a factor in determining who is tested.

It is vital that a pre-employment medical test relates exclusively and directly to the particular duties of the job and does not discriminate against people with disabilities. Employers could be liable for discrimination if they misuse pre-employment medical tests.

An employer could also be liable under privacy laws if they disclose results of a medical test to others, such as other employees.

Designing a pre-employment medical test requires a thorough analysis of what the job entails and a careful matching of tests to the required phy