SCREENING AND SELECTION
OF CHILD WELFARE STAFF

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Nationally, the issue of recruitment and retention of qualified child welfare staff is reaching crisis proportions and having a negative impact on the delivery of services to vulnerable children. A report by the General Accounting Office in 2003 showed that workforce problems – high caseloads, training deficiencies and staffing shortages – affected outcomes in terms of children's safety, permanency and well-being. In response, the Children's Bureau of the US Department of Health and Human Services has funded eight universities across the country to develop models and training related to effective recruitment and retention. The Child Welfare Training Institute (CWTI) at the University of Southern Maine is one of the recipients of this funding.

The goal of CWTI's project is to increase the recruitment and retention of competent child welfare staff through the development and implementation of a comprehensive, research-based and practical training model. Research shows that there is no quick fix for the complex problem of recruitment and retention. In addition, some alarming trends for the 21st century are exacerbating this long-standing issue. We are facing a shrinking qualified labor pool: enrollment in social work schools is down with the result that the demand for qualified social workers is exceeding supply; the workforce is aging and as the baby boom generation retires it will be hard to replace them. Workload is a major factor: recent reform initiatives have added more responsibilities, cases are becoming more complex and technology is often seen as an additional burden rather than a time-saver. Workers have fewer opportunities for flexibility and autonomy: structured decision-making models, increased oversight and demand for accountability are eroding their sense of discretion. Most important, some workers perceive a disconnect between their personal sense of mission – the opportunity to make a difference with children and families – which attracted them to child welfare and what they see as an increased agency focus on documentation and court work.

Recognizing that there are no silver bullets for the complex, systemic issue of workforce development (Cyphers, 2001), the project is developing a mix of best practice strategies to improve recruitment, selection and retention as shown in the conceptual model on the following page.

The intent is to develop agency capacity for effective human resource management, forging a link between the agency's mission to deliver quality services and the recruitment, selection, motivation and retention of qualified staff. The project focuses on the Maine public child welfare agency and collaborates with New Hampshire and Vermont as well as with other New England states through the New England Association of Child Welfare Training Directors.

This paper summarizes best practice approaches to screening and selection and provides examples of some innovative approaches. More information can be found on the project website www.cwti.org/rr

MODEL FOR RECRUITMENT/SELECTION AND RETENTION APPROACHES

RETENTION

Agency Role
- Clear vision/mission
- Performance expectations (standards and practice model)
- Learning Organization
- Clear communication channels
- Structures for staff input into training and work design

Professional Development for All Staff
- Coaching and mentoring
- Tuition reimbursement
- In-agency graduate field placement
- Benefits to encourage tenure in job
- Reward system for MSW attainment

Support for Supervisors
- Performance Expectations
- Competency-based development
- Supervisory Academy
- Supervisor support groups
- Graduate courses in supervision

Staff Retention
Support: Coaching & mentoring; team approaches; debriefing traumatic situations; preventing burnout; flexible approaches; wellness; recognition
Growth: Professional development; training; tuition reimbursement; advancement opportunities
Performance: Performance measures; performance evaluation link to competencies.

Community Support
- Public education on agency mission and purpose
- Cross agency training (e.g., Judicial Symposium)

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION
- Organization & Job Analysis – link to mission & public image
- Realistic Recruitment and Screening
- Expanded outreach practices
- Agency/ university partnerships
- Streamlined hiring process
- Agency staff as recruiters
- Expanded Internships (some with employment obligations)
- Competency- and values-based hiring process

LEAVING
- Exit questionnaires
- Analysis and utilization of data for continuous improvement in recruitment and retention
- Post exit follow-up

APPROACH TO SCREENING AND SELECTION

Recruitment, screening and selection are part of a process of actively reaching out to attract a qualified pool of candidates, assessing their match for the job and then making the best fit for the specific position or opening available. Screening includes paper screening to determine whether or not candidates meet the minimum qualifications of the position as well as more in depth assessment of their competencies. Selection refers to the final stages of the process when decisions need to be made about the best match for a specific position. The screening and selection process is also part of the recruitment process and many of the same principles apply.

From the agency perspective, the recruitment, screening and selection process has a dual purpose: to attract the best qualified applicants to the agency and to screen out those who are not or less qualified. The screening process is not just an opportunity for the agency to assess candidates and to determine whether they will be a good fit for the job, but for candidates to assess the organization and to decide whether or not they would accept a job if offered and/or recommend others to apply. There needs to be a balance between maintaining structure, objectivity and rigor in the screening and selection process and encouraging applicants to believe that the agency is a good place to work. A process that is perceived by potential applicants as lengthy and unfriendly will discourage potential applicants. On the other hand a process that is perceived to be objective and professional, though demanding, will provide a favorable image of the organization. The "goal should be to have everyone come away feeling positively about their interview, even if they don't ultimately get the job. They will tell many more people about a bad interview experience (on average 11) and that vibe will taint your agency" (Hornung 2007, p. 3). In a tight labor market, it may be more important to tip the balance in favor of recruitment – attracting candidates to work for the agency. Where the qualified labor pool is larger, it may be more important to focus on the screening aspect of the process.

There are three key steps in the process: identifying the skills and competencies needed to do the job right; designing a system to select based on those skills; and validating the system by demonstrating that it measures characteristics reasonably related to job performance (Partnership for Public Service, 2004). Some steps in the process will be required by state or agency regulations; others will be at the discretion of the hiring agency.

The paradigm used to design an effective screening and selection process is: To do this job, in this organization, needs this person. The process needs to be evidence-based and meet the needs of busy practitioners who are doing the screening and selection. It also needs to be developed in close cooperation with the Human Resource Department to ensure that personnel, legal and contract requirements are met. The purpose of the process is to ensure that the best decisions are made that will predict high performance and retention on the job. To do this, the process must include assessment procedures that are job related, that assess the specific competencies needed and that predict job performance. In addition, the process needs to be standardized, fair and include training of interviewers. The process will be judged successful to the degree to which it has substantial validity, is legally sound, and produces positive applicant reactions to the job and the organization (Eder & Harris, 1999).

These are demanding criteria, but the stakes are high and the consequence of error potentially very costly to an organization. According to Larson and Hewitt (2005) 80 percent of job failures can be

traced directly to mistakes made in the selection process. The hard costs involved in hiring are substantial and include the costs of recruitment, staff time, reference checks, orientation and training of new employees. In a recent analysis, the cost of hiring a new caseworker in Maine was estimated to be over $16,000 per person (Cowperthwaite, 2006). But the monetary costs are only the tip of the iceberg. Many studies have shown the enormous negative impact on clients (Folman, 2000) and agency outcomes (Flower, McDonald & Sumski, 2005) when caseworkers leave their job.

Screening can also be a perilous activity from a legal standpoint. There are two basic categories of legal risk in screening: the risk of not screening thoroughly enough, and the risk of violating an applicant's legal rights (Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 2004). In the first area, the agency is liable for a charge of negligent hiring if a staff member turns out to be unfit for service. Under the second scenario, the likely plaintiff is an applicant who was rejected by an agency. Both risks can be mitigated by engaging in a structured, job-related screening process and by training hiring managers in its use. However, because the consequence of error is so high and because laws in states vary about specific components, agencies are recommended to involve their own legal counsel in the design of their screening process.

IDENTIFYING THE SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES FOR THE JOB

The first step in the screening and selection process is to identify the skills and competencies needed to do the job right. To do this we need to analyze the requirements of the job and based on this analysis, identify the skills and competencies needed by a beginning worker.

Job Analysis

Job analysis is a basic requirement for developing valid selection procedures according to both professional (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 1987) and legal (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978) testing guidelines (Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1997). Job analysis, by definition, enhances the job-relatedness of the screening process, thus making it more credible to supervisors who are familiar with the requirements of the position.
Job analyses comprise two major elements: job descriptions which specify the work to be done; and job specifications which indicate the personal characteristics necessary to do the work.

There are many forms of job analysis including direct observation, interviews, panels of subject matter experts and questionnaires (including task inventories and checklists). These are used to produce a job description that typically includes the following information: job title, job activities (tasks or responsibilities), working conditions (indoor/outdoor, heat, lighting), social environment (reporting relationships, co-workers), and conditions of employment (hours of work, benefits, payment, driving).

Child welfare practice has changed dramatically in the last few years. Often the existing job descriptions have not changed to reflect this change in practice. It is particularly important in the recruitment and selection process to update the job description to reflect the agency's current practice. The "new paradigm" of child welfare will often be more attractive to applicants and the process will be more content valid by reflecting the current realities of the position.

Along with updating the job description to reflect new responsibilities and practice, agencies need to review job requirements to reflect the personal characteristics needed to do the job. Some minimum qualifications need to be identified for all caseworkers. These include educational background and level, valid driver's license, no criminal history, etc. In addition, the personal characteristics (knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies) need to be clarified. Again, the change in child welfare is necessitating a change in the personal characteristics of caseworkers. In Maine, for example, the competency of "teamwork" has been added to the screening index to reflect the more team-based approaches to practice in the agency.

Focus on Specific Competencies

Job analysis is the necessary base to ensure that the screening and selection process is job related but provides insufficient information to decide whether an applicant is best qualified for the job in question. Competency-based hiring and selection systems stress the need to identify competencies that are most likely to predict long-term success on the job and that are difficult to develop through either training or experience. Spenser & Spenser (1993) capture this important principle in their saying: "you can teach a turkey to climb a tree, but it's easier to hire a squirrel". Competency-based systems by promoting a better person job match also increase the motivation of the person who is

hired (Spenser and Spenser, 1993). Competency-based screening systems focus on the underlying characteristics of candidates – the attitudes, values, traits and motives that people bring to the job. Once on the job, supervisors can teach new caseworkers how to fill out the right form or recognize the dynamics of abuse and neglect; but it is very difficult to make someone more flexible or change their values about children and families.

Berman and Motowidlo (1992) further argue that selection criteria should embrace a domain of organizational behavior broader than just task activities. They should also include contextual activities—such pro-social organizational behavior as putting in extra effort on the job, persistence, cooperating with others, following organizational rules and procedures, and supporting organizational objectives.

In addition, studies of child welfare caseworkers have identified a relationship between personal characteristics and turnover. The characteristics that correlate with caseworker retention are: self-efficacy motivation (energy and persistence in overcoming obstacles to accomplish goals); personal responsiveness to the needs of clients (doing for others, altruistic empathy); and goodness of fit (personal job competence) (Ellett, Ellett, Kelley & Noble, 1996; Rycraft, 1994).

Identifying skills and competencies

Several states have identified the competencies necessary for entry level child welfare caseworkers. In Maine a holistic caseworker competency model was developed using a three-pronged approach: Functional Job Analysis (Fine, 1989) identified the functional or task-related knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs); Behavioral Event Interviews (Spenser & Spenser, 1993) revealed the characteristics of outstanding performers; and an Organizational Assessment (including the examination of policy and procedures manuals and a survey of the organizational culture and climate) identified context knowledge and skills (Bernotavicz, 1994a).

This model, which included thirty-four competencies, was refined over a period of two years with the participation of groups of subject matter experts (SMEs) and was used in the design of the curriculum for a twenty-day competency-based pre-service program (Bernotavicz, 1994b). In December 1994, in anticipation of possible use of the model for hiring and selection purposes, a survey was sent to all caseworkers and supervisors asking them to rate the competencies according to three factors:
1. Competencies necessary upon entry to the job;
2. Competencies that should be emphasized in pre-service training; and
3. Competencies that should be addressed in the in-service training program.

Recognizing that screening becomes more accurate and manageable when raters can focus on fewer competencies (Mitrani, Dalziel, & Fitt, 1992), nine competencies from the thirty-four in the child welfare caseworker competency model were selected for the screening process implemented in 1995 (Bernotavicz and Locke, 2000).

Since 1995, the state of Maine has adopted core competencies used in the performance appraisal process for all state workers; there has been considerable research on the competencies that predict retention of child welfare staff; and the Maine child welfare program has adopted concepts related to Emotional Intelligence as part of their performance management process and a revised practice model that emphasizes partnering with families and the community. The new listing of entry level competencies was expanded to include indicators from all of these sources. In order to make the

competency listing consistent with the competencies used in the Performance Management process, we utilized the headings of the state core competencies. We added a new competency (Teamwork) which is one of the state core competences and a key competency in engaging with families and working with the community in the Practice model. The updated competency model used in the screening process is shown in the following chart.

Child Welfare Caseworker Entry Level Competencies

1. **Interpersonal Relations:** *Awareness of others' feelings, needs, perceptions and concerns*
   - Shows respect and tolerance for each person
   - Relates well to others
   - Demonstrates trust, sensitivity and mutual respect
   - Recognizes the contributions diversity brings to job performance and creativity
   - Demonstrates altruistic empathy – caring for others

2. **Self Awareness/Confidence:** *Knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources and limitations*
   - Accurate self-assessment: knowing ones' strengths and limits
   - Self-confidence: strong sense of self worth and capabilities (self efficacy)
   - Emotional awareness: recognizing one's emotions and their effects

3. **Analytic Thinking:** *Using data to understand patterns and develop concepts*
   - Information gathering skills
   - Use of range of sources
   - Hypothesis formation
   - Conceptual frameworks
   - Looking beyond superficial explanations
   - Decision making

4. **Adaptability:** *Flexibility in handling change*
   - Handles day-to-day challenges confidently
   - Is willing to adjust to multiple demands, shift priorities, ambiguity and rapid change
   - Shows resilience in the face of constraints, frustrations or adversity
   - Ability to adapt styles and shift gears
   - Shows evidence of coping skills
   - Innovation: comfortable with new ideas; open to new information.

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5. **Observation Skills:** *Ability to describe events factually*
   - Ability to observe and identify key elements
   - Recognition of inconsistencies
   - Factual descriptions
   - Accurate observations

6. **Sense of mission:** *Commitment to the welfare of others*
   - Evidence of child welfare knowledge and/or experience
   - Clear values/beliefs about protecting children and preserving families consistent with Bureau's reform goals
   - Desire to make things better for others

7. **Communication Skills:** *Open clear communication*
   - Speaks clearly and expresses self well
   - Demonstrates attentive listening
   - Conveys information clearly and effectively through written documents

8. **Motivation:** *Emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals*
   - Commitment: aligning with the goals of the agency or group
   - Achievement: strives to improve, drives for results and success
   - Sets high standards of performance
   - Displays a high level of effort and commitment to perseverance performing the work
   - Optimism: persistence in pursuing goals

9. **Planning and Organizing work:** *Ordering activities to achieve goals*
   - Ability to assess/reprioritize
   - Use of time management tools
   - Defines and arranges activities in a logical and efficient manner

10. **Teamwork:** *Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals*
    - Contributes to organizational goals
    - Fosters collaboration among team members and among teams

DESIGNING A SCREENING AND SELECTION PROCESS

The second step in the process is to design a screening and selection system to hire staff based on the skills and competencies identified. Human resource experts recommend a multiple hurdle approach to assessment that consists of a set of assessment procedures to manage the candidate pool and narrow the field of qualified candidates. Assessments should be implemented in a timely manner so that top candidates do not have to wait around for a hiring decision and the procedures should be selected and sequenced based on cost and benefit. Less costly methods should be used in the beginning of the process when the pool is largest (Nelson, 2007).

Assessment Methods

The selection of the specific assessment method needs to be based on both its predictive validity and practicality (cost effectiveness, time to administer, need for training). Following are some common assessment methods appropriate for the child welfare field.

Training and Experience (T&E) Assessments: This method refers to a paper screen process whereby employers review applications, rate them against evaluation criteria for the position and arrive at a number score for each applicant. When developed properly T&E assessments can be good predictors of performance and are an effective approach for winnowing out candidates who do not meet the minimum qualifications for the position as well as ranking those who do qualify based upon their training and experience. The challenge is to develop evaluation criteria that distinguish high performers and valid scoring techniques for measuring applicants against those criteria (Nelson, 2007).

Biodata Questionnaires: Based on research showing that past experience can predict future performance, biodata questionnaires seek information about past behavior and experience relevant to the skills required by the job (Guion, 1998).

Structured Interviews: While interviews are the most common form of assessment, research shows that they have very low predictive validity unless they are structured. The validity improves from .29 for unstructured to .62 for structured interviews (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt & Maurer, 1994; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988). Structure includes the following components: asking the same questions in the same order of all candidates; using the same interviewers; providing the same opportunities to each candidate (including controlling the length of the interview); and limiting prompting, follow-up questions, and elaboration on answers. Structure provides a standardized approach that ensures that each candidate is provided the same opportunity and is supported by both psychological testing principles and EEO requirements (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978; Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 1987).

Work Samples: Work samples provide an opportunity for candidates to engage in a simulation that captures key elements of the job. Work samples are strong predictors of job performance and also provide a form of realistic job preview allowing candidates to make a more informed decision about whether or not this is the right job for them.

Situational Judgment Tests: These tests present applicants with job related scenarios (either written, verbal or video) and ask applicants how they would respond. Responses can be either narrative, role-play or in a multiple-choice format.

General Mental Ability (GMA) Tests: These pencil and paper tests (such as an SAT) measure an individuals' mental ability or intelligence and have been shown to be a good predictor of future job performance (Schmitt and Hunter, 1998).
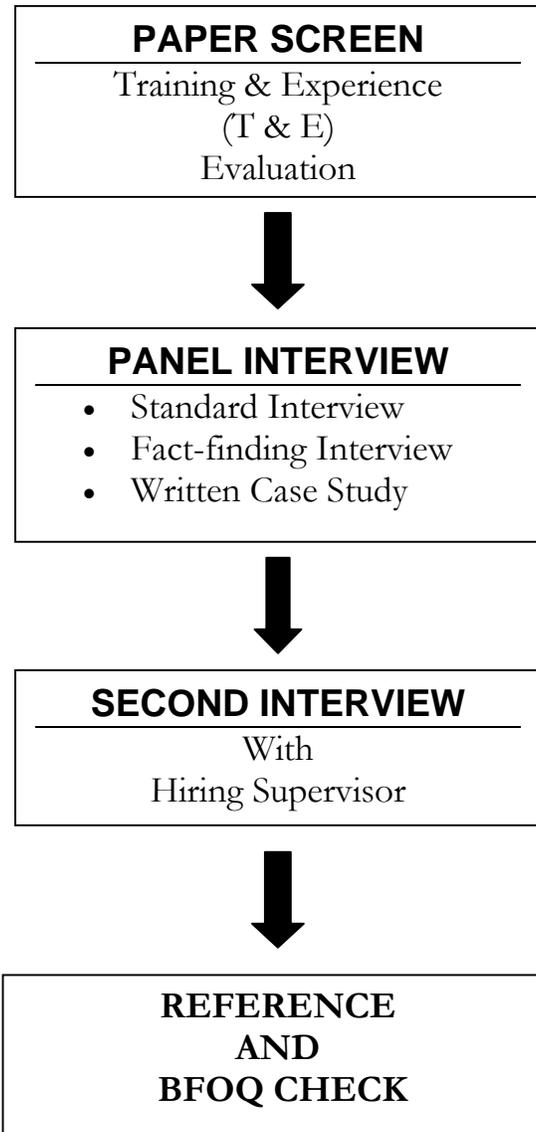
Assessment Centers: This approach is used to screen for a variety of positions (including managers, school principals, firefighters and police officers). Candidates experience a variety of assessment procedures (such as an In-Basket Exercise, Structured Interview, Leaderless Group Exercise) related to the job. Assessment Centers have high predictive validity, but because of the fact that they require trained assessors and multiple assessment procedures they are expensive and time-consuming to administer (Decenzo & Robbins, 1988).

Combination of Methods

The validity of the screening process is increased when a range or combination of job-related assessments are included (Guion, 1998; Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Thornton, 1992). In their meta analysis of selection methods, Schmidt and Hunter (1998) recommend combinations such as a General Mental Ability (GMA) test combined with an integrity test (composite validity of .65) and the combination of a GMA test and a structured interview (composite validity of .63). The Department of Labor (1999) recommends using a whole-person approach to assessment. Rather than relying too much on any one test, employers should use a succession of approaches to winnow down the applicant pool to identify those best matched to the job.

The following chart shows the process that is used in Maine to screen child welfare caseworkers. This approach includes a range of job-related assessments. It begins with the paper screen of applicants conducted centrally by the Bureau of Human Resources using a Training and Experience (T&E) rating. Based on this rating, applicants are placed on the state register for positions. The Panel Interview is conducted at the District Level by teams of three supervisors and consists of three job related approaches: a standard interview, fact finding interview and a case study written exercise. This process is described in more detail later. The next step in the process is a second interview. This interview is conducted by an individual supervisor when a specific position is available. The final step in the process is to check references and to determine whether or not the applicant meets the Bone Fide Occupational Qualifications (BFOQs) for the position. These include a valid driver's license, a social work license and no prior criminal record.

Maine Screening Process

| **PAPER SCREEN** |
| Training & Experience |
| (T & E) |
| Evaluation |

⬇

| **PANEL INTERVIEW** |
| • Standard Interview |
| • Fact-finding Interview |
| • Written Case Study |

⬇

| **SECOND INTERVIEW** |
| With |
| Hiring Supervisor |

⬇

| **REFERENCE** |
| **AND** |
| **BFOQ CHECK** |

DEVELOPING THE SCREENING AND SELECTION TESTS

Selection Index

To develop a valid screening and selection system, the competencies to be assessed need to be matched with an appropriate assessment method to develop a screening index or test battery such as the following example for the Maine Panel Interview. This selection index includes a combination of tests: a Standard Interview, Fact-finding Interview and written Case Study.

CHILD WELFARE CASEWORKER TEST BATTERY

	Standard Interview	Fact-finding Interview	Written Exercise
1. Interpersonal Relations	■	■	
2. Self Awareness / Confidence	■	■	
3. Analytic Thinking	■	■	■
4. Adaptability	■	■	
5. Observation Skills		■	■
6. Sense of Mission	■		■
7. Communication Skills	■	■	■
8. Motivation	■	■	
9. Planning & Organizing		■	■
10. Teamwork	■		■

Structured Interviews

According to Aamodt (2005), a structured interview is one in which all questions are based on a job analysis, every applicant is asked the same questions, and a standardized scoring key is used to assign ratings to each question. Structured interviews are "clearly the best bang for the buck on improving your assessment processes" (Nelson, 2007). They do require resources to design a procedure that results in better hires and increased defensibility of the assessment process. But once developed, they can serve the agency for many years with only minor modifications to ensure that they continue to be job-related.

This has been borne out in the Maine experience. The agency went through a lengthy process in 1995 to re-design its selection process (Bernotavicz & Locke, 2000). In 2004, using funding from the Children's Bureau for Recruitment and Retention, we revised the selection process. We were open to making major revisions but were gratified to find that supervisors were very pleased with the process and in the end made only minor revisions to update the competency model and screening materials. The following describes the components of the Panel Interview Screening Process.

Panel Interview Screening Process

Review of case materials: When the candidate arrives for the interview, he or she is taken to a quiet room where instructions about the process are. The candidate is given a folder with the incomplete case study materials and allotted thirty minutes to read the information and prepare for the fact-finding interview.

Standard interview: This second phase consists of a forty-five-minute interview conducted by a panel of three casework supervisors who ask thirteen standardized questions in turn.

Fact-finding interview: The candidate is then directed by a member of the panel to ask questions pertaining to the case material that the candidate read earlier. Here the focus shifts from the candidate's ability to respond to questions to the ability to ask questions, probe for information, shift gears, and identify key facts. Fifteen minutes is allotted for the fact-finding interview during which one member of the panel serves as the resource person and has available in a folder additional information on the case. The other panel members observe the candidate's performance and screen for competencies, including the number of key facts the candidate elicits.

Written exercise: The candidate returns to the quiet room to produce a case analysis that includes a summary of the facts in the case, problem statement, conclusions, and recommendations. At the end of thirty minutes, the applicant's written responses are collected and returned to the members of the interview panel for rating.

Standard Interview Questions

There are three types of questions that can be used in a screening interview (Opinion, Past Behavior and Situational).

1. *Opinion:* The Opinion questions provide insight into the candidate's thinking and self-awareness. These questions relate to the candidates' views of children and families, as well as their self-awareness and values.

2. *Past Behavior:* Past behavior questions are based on the theory that behavior in actual past situations can predict future behavior on the job. Two elements are important. First that applicants' answers are presumed to be deliberate choices, not mindless, reflex actions performed without regard for their consequences. Second, the more consistent the behaviors are over a number of actions in the past the more likely they are to behave in a similar way in the future. Therefore the answers predict job performance because they describe habitual patterns of intentional behavior that applicants perform in situations that are like situations that happen on the job.

This assumes that people are telling the truth – they may present self in best light, but it's difficult to fabricate, especially if interviewers probe and/or ask questions that screen for the same competency across different situations.

3. *Situational:* The purpose of these questions is to elicit evidence of the candidates' analytical ability, their thinking process, and their judgment. Questions related to behavior in hypothetical future situations can predict job performance because they measure intentions. The most immediate

antecedent of behavior is intention or goal. There is a great deal of empirical support for predictions made by goal-setting theory about effects of goals on performance level (Lock & Latham, 1990) and that interviews that use structured questions about behavior in future situations have validity (McDaniel et al., 1994). Applicants may be reporting what they think is the best way to deal with situations described in interview questions, will try to perform these actions when the situations occur on the job and have the skills necessary to perform them effectively.

According to a review of the research (Campion, Palmer & Campion, 19970, all three types of questions are valid in terms of predicting behavior on the job. There are no "magic bullet" interview questions. The issue is not to find the perfect question but knowing what to look for in the answer – the insight into the competencies including the thinking processes used, what motivates candidates to behave in certain ways and their self-awareness including their ability to reflect on and learn from their experience.

In the Maine Screening process, the Standard Interview consists of thirteen questions with a combination of opinion, past behavior and situational questions. To develop the questions, we surveyed all supervisors and asked them to submit examples of questions that they currently use in interviews and they think are particularly effective. We also conducted a comprehensive national search of screening materials from the private and public sector to identify interview questions. We then grouped questions according to the competencies they addressed and edited to eliminate redundancies. We compiled the resulting questions and again surveyed all supervisors to elicit their opinions on preferred questions. The workgroup met and made decisions on the final questions to be included as well as a listing of alternate questions that could be substituted.

Follow ups and Probes: While the Standard Interview is highly structured, this does not mean that interviewers cannot follow up or use probes. The key to follow-up questions is to ensure that the information will allow the interviewer to assign the most accurate rating to the construct being measured by the question. To assist interviewers in understanding the applicant's answer, the Maine interview guide includes a list of possible follow up questions or probes.

Other Screening Techniques

Although the Standard Interview is a very valid predictor of performance on the job, the format does not lend itself to assessing the full range of competencies needed for effective performance as a caseworker. In the Standard Interview, regardless of how effective and probing the questions, we are only able to observe how the candidate responds to questions posed by the interview team. For this reason, the Maine Panel Interview includes other components that are essentially job sample tests. These are the review of written materials (Case Study) an interview to get more information about the case (the Fact Finding Interview) and a written exercise (Case Analysis). These components cover competencies not covered in the Standard Interview and provide an opportunity for the candidate to display some competencies in a different way – for example, their flexibility, self confidence, analytic thinking and written communications skills. Some candidates who do very well in the Standard Interview have a hard time with this part of the screening process; others shine at it. This gives a more rounded view of the candidate's ability.

Fact Finding Interview: The design of the Fact Finding Interview is based on the individual fact-finding and decision-making exercise often found in Assessment Centers (DeCenzo & Robbins, 1988). The candidate is given written materials ahead of time and prepares questions of additional

information needed. The candidate is then given 15 minutes at the end of the Standard Interview to ask questions to find out more facts about the case. This provides an opportunity for the panel to see the candidate in a different light, to see how he or she has prepared, the ability to take charge and ask questions rather than simply respond. One person on the panel is the Resource Person whose role is to provide information in response to the questions. The other members of the panel observe the candidate and make notes on the competencies observed, on the process used to gather information, how he or she behaves when stuck, whether or not they are able to shift gears when a line of questioning is unproductive, the ability to pick up on clues and follow up with questions; are they satisfied with superficial explanations or do they dig deeper to get more facts. These are all critical skills in child welfare work.

Cast Study: Documentation is another key element of the caseworker job. The last component of the Panel Interview is a written exercise where the candidate is given 30 minutes to write a summary of the facts in the case and provide recommendations on what should happen. This provides the interview panel with an opportunity not only to assess the candidate's written communication skills in terms of grammar, punctuation and style, but also other critical competencies. The candidate's response to the written exercise demonstrates the ability to synthesize key elements of the case study, fit pieces of information into a coherent summary and make judgments based on the information gathered in the Fact Finding Interview.

A workgroup of experienced supervisors and administrators again participated actively in the design process of the Fact Finding Interview and Case Study. They reviewed and updated the two existing case studies in light of the agency's new practice model and the forms required. Several changes were made to reflect increased involvement of the families, the use of family support and development of a safety plan. The workgroup carefully cross-checked the changes in the case materials against the information provided to the Resource Person to ensure that the two sets of information were consistent. We then sent a draft of the proposed revisions to all supervisors for their review and comment.

Interview Errors

The reliability and validity of the interview can also be improved by making panel members aware of common interview errors and encouraging them to avoid them. Everyone has biases, prejudices, and false assumptions that influence their judgment. When interviewing it is important to minimize these influences so that the candidate evaluation is as fair and accurate as possible. Reduction of these influences begins by being able to identify errors associated with the interview process. The following are some common sources of interview error.

Interview Errors

1. Halo and Pitchfork Effect
This means allowing a general impression or one particular characteristic of a candidate to affect all evaluations of the individual. Some raters will consistently rate some individuals higher or lower than others not because of actual differences in performance but because of their general impression of the individuals. For example, an applicant who is well dressed, groomed immaculately, and an engaging conversationalist may impress raters to such an extent they tend to be overly generous in their evaluation of the candidate. Or a candidate may respond poorly to the first two questions out of nervousness, with the result that the interviewers fail to rate fairly their responses to subsequent questions. It is important to rate each question and each component of the screening process on its own merits.

2. Responsibility Error
When assessing performance we often view failure or success as a result of personal factors rather than a result of factors outside the control of the individual. Blame or praise is given to the individual rather than taking into account the circumstance surrounding the behavior. For example, a project an applicant was in charge of may have been cut due to insufficient funding rather than the quality of the work. Nevertheless, the applicant is seen less positively for failure to complete a project.

3. Leniency Error
Leniency error is when raters are reluctant to give someone a poor rating. This gives poor candidates an advantage.

4. Central Tendency Error
This refers to the tendency of raters to score a candidate using the middle points of a scale, avoiding the positive and negative extremes. It is the safe rating since no one receives a particularly good or particularly bad rating. The normal impact of this type of error is that it negatively affects particularly good performers while being overly generous with poor performers.

Scoring Guides

The validity and reliability of the screening process can also be improved by the use of scoring guides. To develop a scoring guide subject matter experts (SMEs) in the organization need to obtain consensus regarding excellent, average and poor answers to each question (Latham & Sue-Chan, 1996). The following table provides a procedure for creating an interview scoring guide. According to Eder and Harris (1999), this will not only improve the reliability and validity of the interview, but will serve as documentation of the job relevance of the process if there is a legal challenge.

Creating Interview Questions Scoring Guides

1. Assemble a group of three or four subject matter experts (SMEs) who are familiar with the job and its requirements.
2. For each interview question, ask the SMEs to think about either how an average employee would answer the question or how an average employee has actually performed in the situation. List the key points.
3. For each interview question, ask the SMEs to think about either how an outstanding employee would answer the question or how an outstanding employee has actually performed in the situation. List the key points.
4. For each interview question, ask the SMEs to think about either how an unacceptable or below-average employee would answer the question or how an unacceptable employee has actually performed in the situation. List the key points.
5. Be sure to obtain consensus on the key points for average, outstanding, and unacceptable answers. If there is disagreement on a key point, eliminate that point from the scoring guide. If there is a lack of consensus on several key points across two or more levels, it may be best to eliminate the question altogether.

Eder, Robert W. & Harris, Michael M. (Ed.). (1991). *The Employment Interview Handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc..

In Maine we developed scoring guides for each of the questions in the Standard Interview and similar guides for the Fact Finding Interview and written Case Study. Because the competency of Communication Skills is shown throughout the process, we developed a separate Scoring Guide showing examples of how that competency can be demonstrated. This scoring guide for Communication Skills is shown on the following page.

Rating of Competencies

The scoring guides help to discriminate among poor, average and outstanding responses on specific components of the screening process, but the final rating of each candidate is based on their score on the ten competencies.

Panel members are instructed to rate the candidate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being high. The Standard Interview is weighted by a factor of two because it provides the most amount of contact with the candidate. The scores for each of the components are added to produce a composite score. The three members of the interview panel combine their composite scores and take the average to reach one final score for each candidate. Discussion of different ratings provides the opportunity to clarify what was observed and the evidence used. This score is used to rank order the applicants and determine who will be invited back for a second interview from which the final decision to hire is made.

Scoring Guide for Communication Skills

Scoring Guide for the overall competency of Communication

Because communication skills are so critical to child welfare work and are demonstrated throughout the interview, a separate scoring guide has been developed.

Competencies: Communication Skills: *open, clear communication*

- Speaks clearly and expresses self well
- Demonstrates attentive listening
- Conveys information clearly and effectively through written documents

Poor responses:	Average responses:	Outstanding responses:
* Uses incorrect grammar and poor choice of vocabulary * Speaks routinely in brief phrases rather than complete thoughts * Speaks in a disorganized manner with thoughts in random order, not organized chronologically or by meaning * Responds to parts of questions only * Does not finish thoughts/responses * Displays distracting mannerisms and gestures; poor posture, including slouching and sprawling, crossed arms * Does not make eye contact or stares steadily at panel member(s) * Has distracting verbal mannerisms and voice quality such as mumbling, speaking in a monotone, repeatedly injecting "ahhh" into speech; tone outside the normal range	* Speaks articulately, with thoughts completed and organized * Answers all parts of questions, asking for repeats of questions, if needed * Displays no distracting speech mannerisms or inappropriate voice quality * Displays attentiveness to panel members with variety in affect, as appropriate * Makes eye contact with panel members * Displays no distracting behaviors, has good posture	* Speaks confidently in complete and complex sentences * Uses range of vocabulary * Uses professional terminology associated with child welfare and social work * Uses range of inflection * Demonstrates energy and enthusiasm * Engages with all panel members

Engaging end users in the design process

Successful implementation of a more rigorous screening and selection system requires the collaboration of both the Human Resource Management (HRM) department and the hiring managers (usually supervisors in the child welfare system). In most cases, the HRM staff will welcome a more rigorous process that complies with professional and legal standards related to hiring and selection. However some degree of reluctance or resistance might be anticipated from supervisors in implementing a new approach. Eder and Harris (1999) identify four major factors that contribute to this resistance: loss of control, preferred informality, the importance of "gut feelings" and time constraints.

Loss of Control: Requiring a more standardized process including set questions and scoring guides might be seen as an example of unwanted infringement on supervisory discretion in the hiring process. Sometimes supervisors are unwilling to give up their favorite interview questions or techniques.

Preferred Informality: Hiring managers may feel that a more structured approach may create negative reactions because applicants prefer a more casual process.

The importance of "Gut feelings": Because structured approaches are based on strictly job-related information, supervisors may feel constrained in their ability to use their instincts to make judgments about candidates.

Time Demands: To a busy manager, or supervisor, a lengthy structured screening process may be perceived as an unjustifiable waste of his or her limited time.

In Maine the hiring and selection process is a combination of centralized and decentralized responsibility as shown on the earlier chart. We recognized that working collaboratively with HRM staff was crucial to the success of the process and garnered the support of both the Director of the State Bureau of Human Resources and the DHHS HRM Specialist. In response to data showing the high rate of turnover in the early months of employment, the State Bureau provided a waiver to the child welfare agency to allow a competency-based hiring approach in the hopes of improving the person/job match (Bernotavicz and Locke, 2000). The DHHS HRM Specialist participated in the design process including providing training to supervisors.

To address the potential sources of resistance and to garner support and commitment from hiring supervisors, we used a multi pronged approach. First, we clarified the responsibilities of supervisors in the recruitment, screening and selection process. These responsibilities have always been part of the supervisors' job; but we articulated a performance standard as part of the Standards for Supervisors as shown in the following chart. This performance standard was reviewed and approved by the HRM department, supervisors and management and provided the basis for all future training and professional development on this topic.

Standards for Supervision in Child Welfare

Strong supervision supports positive caseworker/client relationships, comprehensive child and family assessments, plans that identify challenges, build upon the client strengths and meet their needs, and a case flow that results in better outcomes (e.g. Safety, permanency and well-being) for children and families. Strong supervision is based on a positive supervisor/caseworker relationship that promotes self-reflection, identifies challenges, builds upon strengths and facilitates professional growth and development. These standards represent the Bureau of child and Family Services' expectations of supervisors.

COMMIT TO RECRUITMENT, SCREENING AND SELECTION OF QUALIFIED STAFF

EXPECTATIONS:

The quality of services to children and families is dependent on staff who possess the knowledge, skills and personal characteristics to work in and remain committed to this challenging field. Attracting and selecting the right person for the job is the critical first step in assuring a competent and stable workforce.

- Pursue recruitment opportunities and/or work with district administration to develop specific activities.
- Participate in agency sponsored recruitment activities.
- Maintain communication links with prospective candidates and presents the agency in a positive light.
- Know and comply with law and policy related to fair hiring and selection processes.
- Develop and maintain current knowledge and skill in the screening and selection process.
- Participate in panel interviews to screen candidates.
- Conduct job specific interviews, reference and background checks to select the most suitable candidate for a vacancy.
- Identify and select people who are able to demonstrate the competencies needed and whose values and philosophy are consistent with the agency's philosophy and mission.
- Coordinate and support field placements and internships to attract qualified staff.
- Justify and document hiring decisions using job-related criteria.

The second strategy was to involve supervisors in each step of the design process. We went through a structured process in the original design of the selection process in 1995 to identify the core competencies to address in the selection process. First, we asked a work group of supervisors to brainstorm those competencies that they felt were important to success for a beginning caseworker. Then we compared this listing with the results of a statewide survey that had asked supervisors to identify those competencies needed at entry to the job. We found a high level of agreement between the two listings. The resulting listing became the basis for the original screening process. We also asked supervisors to submit all of their favorite interview questions and whenever possible used these questions in the new process. In the re-design in 2004 we made sure that we provided opportunities for supervisor participation at each step. We used the agency e-mail system to send out surveys and solicit input on areas such as competencies to address, questions to be asked and scoring guides. In this way, we developed supervisor buy-in and face validity for the screening materials.

In addressing the desire for informality, we included effective rapport-building skills in the interviewer training. Drawing a parallel with most types of interviewing in social work, we noted that the screening interviewer needs to build rapport up front and then take care to maintain it throughout the interview without having his or her responses or reactions become too influential of the candidate. We also emphasized that structured interviewing does not have to be a rigid process and that screeners can and should use their judgment to ask follow up questions and use probes to gather more information.

To address the potential resistance regarding using gut feelings we emphasize in the training that gut feelings are useful as a signal for the need to probe further on a specific rating factor. We encourage supervisors to pay attention to what their instinct is telling them because that instinct in based on information and experience and ask them to think about what they have seen or heard to support the gut feeling and then note that evidence on their summary rating sheet.

Recognizing how busy supervisors are, we designed the Panel interview to take only one hour of supervisors' time. This compares favorably with the 1-2 hours the process used to take.

Final Hurdles

The Panel Interview is the most in-depth component of the screening process. Based on the score, the candidates are either on or off the register. The final two steps in the process are the Second Interview and the Reference and BFOQ checks.

Second Interview: The second interview occurs when a supervisor has a specific opening. The purpose is to make sure that the candidate is a good fit for the specific program area and supervisory unit. While there is more discretion around the second interview and it is not as structured as the Panel Interview, it still needs to be defensible and follow the same good practice in screening and selection. To develop guidelines for the second interview, we surveyed all supervisors and asked them to provide examples of interview outlines and questions that they currently use. We edited these materials to reduce some redundancy and provided them in the Resource Guide.

Reference Check: The reference check is the final step in the screening process and needs to adhere to the same standards as the rest of the process: job-related, competency based and consistent. Reference checking is a critical tool in collecting information about the candidate's past

behavior on the job that can predict how they will perform as a caseworker; it gives a unique opportunity to get information about how the candidate performs within a real work setting – their work habits, reliability, attendance record and relationship to their supervisor. Failure to conduct a thorough reference check or background investigation can lead to charges of "negligent hiring 'if an applicant who is hired later commits an act that results in personal injury and it is shown that the employer did not exercise care or duty to know of the employee's past history. Unfortunately, because of the fact that many employers are afraid of defamation suits, they are unwilling to give a negative reference and often will only verify basic information about the employment record (yes, the person is or was employed here).

Until recently this process was not standardized in Maine, but fortunately, we located a resource that can assist in collecting this information. The International Personal Management Association (IPMA) has developed a reference checking guide that includes a form and waiver for applicants granting permission for former employers to release job-related information about them securing their written consent to initiate the verification process (IPMA, 2004).

To maintain consistency in the Reference Checking process we also provided formats for conducting a reference check. Written references are generally unreliable and yield little useful information since employers are unwilling to commit any negative information to paper. We therefore recommend that supervisors conduct a telephone reference check using the interview guide provided.

The most reliable sources are people who have had the best opportunity recently to observe the candidate in the types of duties and responsibilities they would face on the job.

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INTERVIEWER TRAINING

As Eder & Harris (1999) note, interviewer training is essential for effective implementation of structured interviewing practices. This includes not only training in how to interview properly, but also convincing managers to use structured interviewing practices. In Maine, the Supervisory Standard provided the performance expectation on using structured interviewing. The training plan could therefore focus on helping supervisors to meet the standard. The first step was to develop a listing of the competencies needed to meet the standard as shown in the following chart.

RECRUITMENT AND SCREENING COMPETENCIES FOR SUPERVISORS

Staff Selection Theory and Application: Understands the theories, techniques and appropriate applications of staff selection.

Legal and Policy Issues: Knows and understands the basis in law and policy related to fair hiring and selection processes.

Criteria: Knows and uses valid, job-related criteria in the hiring and selection process.

Assessments: Knows and follows procedures for implementing multiple, job related assessments to ensure validity and reliability.

Decision Making: makes timely, logical decisions based on available data; maintains and/or explains positions when under pressure from others, confronting resistance if necessary; modifies decisions based on new information when appropriate.

Teamwork: works with others to find a win/win resolution of differences; fosters collaboration among team members; shows the group process skills needed to get diverse groups of people to work together effectively to achieve a common goal.

Judgment: reaches sound conclusions and makes reasonable decisions based on available information; maintains objectivity in handling difficult issues, events or decisions.

Conceptual Thinking: uses theoretical frameworks and incorporates learning from past experience to guide analysis and practice; applies past experience to interpret events, seeing crucial similarities and differences in present and past situations.

Interpersonal Relations: Perceives strengths, needs, challenges and feelings of others; understands and values diversity and different styles of perceiving, learning, communicating and operating; possesses good listening skills; demonstrates trust, sensitivity and mutual respect;.[i]

The next step in the process was to identify the levels of knowledge and skills needed. For example, supervisors could meet some parts of the standard by being provided with additional information; other parts needed opportunities for skill development. We therefore developed a training plan that included a variety of interventions from informational materials, to informational meetings to in-depth skill development. The training materials consist of the following:

Legal and Policy Issues: These materials are used at information sessions for supervisors on the legal and policy issues related to screening and selections. These sessions are conducted by the agency HRM and EEO Specialists and provide an overview of applicable laws, merit system principles and agency policy.

Competency-based Screening and Selection: There are three sets of materials to assist supervisors. A Resource Guide provides step-by-step instructions for supervisors to use in conducting the Panel Interview, Second Interview and Reference Check. A similar Resource Guide for administrative support staff includes instructions and materials to support the Panel Interview. A skill-based curriculum includes a Trainer's Guide, five videos and participant handout materials. These materials are posted on the project website: www.cwti.org/rr

All supervisors in Maine and New Hampshire have received training using these materials. The materials have also been adopted by North Carolina.

EVALUATION

There are several important dimensions in assessing the effectiveness of a screening process. According to Larson & Hewitt (2005), the key element in evaluating selection success is assessing whether the people who got high scores on the selection criteria actually turn out to be excellent performers who stay in their position. One factor to consider is the percentage of new hires who are terminated during the first few months in employment. One study reported by Larson & Hewitt (2005) of new hires in more than 80 organizations found that 15% of new hires were terminated within a year of starting.

Other approaches to evaluating the success of a selection process include assessing the inter-rater reliability of interviews and evaluating the relationship between performance in the selection process with performance on the job. The evaluation plan for the Maine project includes a number of dimensions as shown below.

WHAT	WHEN	WHY
Embedded evaluation – participant questionnaire	During training	How effective is the training? What skills have participants acquired?
Reaction – participant questionnaire	Immediately post training	How did participants like the training? How well did they think the goals were achieved?
Application – participant self assessment	Following the first panel interview post training	How effective was the training in improving skills in practice?
Reliability – review of panel scores of candidates	All panel interviews for one year after training	How consistent are panel members in rating competencies of candidates?
Validity – questionnaire assessment by supervisors of caseworker competencies on the job	All new caseworkers one year after being hired	How effective is the screening process in predicting on the job performance? Do candidates who rated highly in the panel interview rate highly on the job?

Findings from this evaluation plan will be reported in a separate document.

SUMMARY

The screening process serves a dual purpose: selection and recruiting. Unfortunately, research to date suggests that these purposes may conflict because some elements that improve validity (e.g. increased interview structure) may also result in more negative applicant reactions. Blumental (1999) suggests that improvements in the face validity of questions based on a well done job analysis will enhance the predictive validity and also result in more positive applicant reactions of the interview. The interview is also a form of verbal realistic job preview which can result in reducing turnover (Phillips, 1998).

A well-designed, job-related and rigorous process can have a number of benefits to both the applicant and the organization. The extent to which organizations leave applicants with favorable impressions is likely to have a number of important outcomes that may not be immediately apparent, such as a positive reputation, more future applicants and reduced likelihood of lawsuits.

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