



# Diamond in the Rough

## Interviewing & Hiring Comm Center Candidates

~ BY BOB SMITH

Last month, I discussed how an agency's high turnover rate should *not* influence decisions on retaining ineffective or poor performing employees. This month, let's look at how to filter out candidates who may fall into one of these categories *before* they join an agency's staff.

When filling a vacant position, the first step is always research. Start with the job description. Is it current? Does it reflect "extra" duties that have been added to the position since it was last filled? *Example:* If your agency has recently started handling teletype requests or maintaining a warrants database, list those responsibilities in the job description.

As you update the job description, review the knowledge, skills and abilities your agency requires of its candidates. If your agency has recently implemented an emergency medical dispatch program, is there merit in hiring candidates who are CPR certified or have other prior medical training? If your agency's call volume is increasing, do you require candidates to demonstrate multitasking? What about typing or other computer skills?

Be sure to involve your agency's human resources department in this process. This may require training to ensure the HR staff understands the specific needs of a comm center position and how those requirements differ from other county or municipal agencies.

After the job description is updated and approved, it's time to advertise. Don't rely just on local newspapers to get the word out. Today, more people are using the Internet to find employment. If your agency has a Web site, create and maintain a job board for posting open positions and information on the application process. It can include current openings and descriptions, requirements, testing dates and times, and information

about the profession.

If you don't have an online presence, look elsewhere. Other agencies in your area may have a Web site you can post openings on. Research online recruitment services, such as Careerbuilder.com and Monster.com, as well as national level entities, such as APCO International, that post job advertisements. This approach is especially effective if your agency is advertising multiple vacancies.

Also look into non-traditional advertising opportunities. Include a section on applying for and working as a public safety telecommunicator during any public appearances. Making an employment pitch at local venues as part of public education outreach can bring in candidates who are familiar with your agency and its positive outreach. This can increase the number of applicants who are looking to serve the public, not for just a job.

Other agencies may allow you to post openings on their bulletin boards, spreading your advertisement throughout the local public safety community and generating a more informed candidate. Also post ads at community colleges and share them with high school guidance counselors.

After applications start coming in, it's time to screen candidates. Most agencies have several screening levels that include a battery of examinations candidates must successfully complete before progressing to the next level. These tests help filter out candidates early and control costs. Screening ineligible candidates through typing tests or written examinations reduces the number of candidates that go on to more costly tests, such as those that test multitasking or calltaker-specific skills.

A criminal background check and drug test should be conducted early in the screening process. Many agencies also use a polygraph to rule out candidates.

Whatever the method, it's important that agencies use a progressive screening process that has been reviewed by its legal counsel and HR department. This review ensures that the testing methods are compliant with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. In addition, agencies with labor agreements or other union requirements should address these issues in their hiring and screening processes prior to implementing it.

After the applicants are filtered to the most eligible candidates, it's time for the interviews. This step in the hiring process varies. Some agencies conduct a single interview. Others employ a progressive interview process that requires candidates to be recommended from one interview to the next.

Some agencies use an internal panel during their progressive interview process. The panel, usually consisting of full- and part-time telecommunicators and supervisors, interviews the candidates, recommending a select few for further consideration. Because only candidates that progress through all the stages are interviewed by upper management, the process is streamlined.

**The bottom line:** The days of hanging a help-wanted sign out front are gone. A broad advertisement plan and an established and reviewed screening process followed by a formal interview process will ensure that agencies find the candidates who will become successful telecommunicators. The more time and effort an agency invests in its recruitment and hiring process, the better its new employees will be at their new jobs. **||PSC||**



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