

Initial Screening Tools

By Linda L. Graff

Following is a brief description of fourteen readily available screening devices. Based on a careful assessment of each volunteer position, choose the screening devices that are most likely to help you determine candidate suitability.

1. ***Position description.*** The position description establishes the legal basis for screening candidates. There must be clear and defensible continuity between the requirements of the position and the screening techniques used. Screening *more or less* than the position description calls for can create trouble. Be sure that volunteer position descriptions are kept up to date and include all minimum qualifications. Include skill sets, knowledge, and experience both necessary and useful to the position since these will not only help in the choice of screening tools to be used in the initial screening process, but also help you to defend your screening decisions if they are challenged by a volunteer applicant who has been rejected. If you can find a way to share position details with prospective volunteers early in the screening process, underqualified volunteers are better able to screen themselves out.

2. ***Written Application Form.*** This would be a minimum requirement for all volunteer positions since basic demographic data should be kept on file for all volunteers. Consider which of the following information you need to collect:
 - Name and contact information
 - Relevant qualifications
 - Equipment/ vehicle specifications and insurance information if driving own car is part of the job
 - Medical conditions (only if relevant)
 - Availability (day of week, time of day, seasonal)
 - Preferred working conditions or limits
 - Reason/ motivation for volunteering
 - Relevant paid and unpaid work history and skills
 - Other background relevant to the position, e.g., valid driver's licence, language capacity, etc.
 - References and consent
 - Consent to verify information provided
 - Applicant signature and date

3. ***Information Session, Open House, General Meeting.*** If you are in the rare and fortunate circumstance of having large numbers of volunteers regularly express initial interest in volunteering in your organization, public information meetings can be a cost-effective way to disseminate information to large numbers of people on a more or less regular basis. This screening tool works best for giving information out to prospective volunteers and much less well for eliciting information from volunteers, but the opportunity to communicate position

expectations and the steps of the screening process, describe the organization and its mission, and convey a sense of organizational culture can go a long way to helping applicants decide if yours is the right organization for them. You may choose to use this mechanism before or after people have submitted a volunteer application form. One of the primary disadvantages of this screening tool is that volunteers may have to wait for some time until the next information session is scheduled. Because volunteer motivation can be very fragile, a wait at this point in the contact process can result in high loss rates.

4. ***Telephone/ E-mail Interview.*** A preliminary interview of prospective volunteers by telephone or e-mail can be a cost-effective and time-saving mechanism to ensure that applicants meet minimum qualifications, are truly interested in pursuing the possibility of volunteering in your organization, and know what the screening process will entail. This form of contact can usually be set up with relative ease, be done in off-peak business hours (i.e., after work, during a lunch hour), which may be much more convenient for the volunteer, and involve a minimum of cost and time. Telephone and e-mail interviews are not a full substitute for a personal interview wherever the latter is possible, but if volunteers are recruited from remote locations, or are going to volunteer in a virtual environment, the telephone or e-mail interview may be the only mechanism available. If used *instead* of a personal interview, the same kinds of detailed and probing questions (appropriate to the nature of the position) that one would ask in the personal interview can be asked by telephone or electronically. The telephone format does not allow the interviewer to harvest that wealth of information that can be gleaned from observations of body language, presentation style, facial expressions, and so on, but choice of language, pauses, inflection, and emotionality can be telling, even through a telephone line. The e-mail format is more limited, still, than the telephone interview but can still yield useful information and should not be dismissed as a screening tool. Many of the same questions can be asked electronically and here too, much can be gleaned from responses given. These kinds of interview, particularly if used as a preliminary mechanism to ensure the volunteer meets minimum qualifications and is serious about pursuing volunteer work with your organization, can be delegated to (other) volunteers, saving busy staff and volunteer coordinators valuable time.
5. ***Personal Interview(s).*** Personal interviews provide an in-person assessment opportunity and are highly recommended for most positions of responsibility. They are an indispensable tool when personal presentation, communication skills, and/or public relations are involved in the work to be done. Interviews are considered the cornerstone of almost all initial screening protocols. There are different types of interviews (i.e., one-on-one, one-on-group, more than one-on-one, more than one-on-group) and interviews can be repeated. Choose the model(s) that best elicits the information you seek. Be aware that some people who would be great volunteers for you might not interview particularly well.

6. **Reference Checks.** When the background and previous performance of a volunteer is relevant to the current application, or if the position includes any element of trust, the reference check is a highly recommended screening mechanism. How many references and of what type (e.g., personal/character, family member, current and/or previous employment/volunteer placements) are a matter of judgment, based on the demands and risk level of the position. Reference checks have often been dismissed as an unreliable screening mechanism, but current best practice reveals them to be a new cornerstone of effective screening. Their effectiveness, however, depends largely on the competence and thoroughness of the reference checker, so make sure your reference checker is fully skilled, takes the role extremely seriously, and stays current with new standards and procedures.
7. **Qualification Checks.** These kinds of checks are important where the position requires specific skills, licenses, or background, and include, for example, obtaining proof of a valid driver's license and class; diploma or degree; professional license, specific trade, skill or qualification such as valid CPR or life saving certificate. Keep in mind that a startlingly large proportion of applicants for paid positions claim qualifications they do not have. The same almost certainly holds true for applicants for volunteer positions even if to a lesser extent. This screening mechanism is usually cheap and relatively easy and, oddly, often omitted from otherwise comprehensive screening protocols. **A good measure of cynicism may not be out of place in the initial screening process.**
8. **Police Record Check.** Police record checks (variously referred to as criminal background checks, background checks, police checks) provide information on the existence of candidates' previous criminal behaviour that *has been detected and reported*, and convictions for which pardons have not been granted. Police record checks are highly recommended for all positions of trust, but do keep in mind that a clear police record check is not a guarantee of either harmlessness or suitability. **Recent research indicates that there are many potentially harmful people who seek positions of trust in nonprofit organizations as an easy avenue to access vulnerable people and who have simply never been caught doing anything wrong.** They have no police record and would pass through this particular screening device undetected. The lesson: beware of false negatives! Police record checks are most useful when combined with other screening devices. Since there are different levels of police record checks available, and since different police departments employ different protocols, it is critical that you consult with the police department or detachment in your area to find out what is covered (and not covered) and how to access them.
9. **Child Abuse Registry.** In some locations a registry of known child abusers is maintained as a separate data set from criminal records (which may also hold some or all of the same information). For any organization creating opportunities for access to children, this is a valuable screening device. Such registries are not maintained everywhere and access to their contents varies, so you will have to

check in your area to find out if one exists, whether its information will be made available to your organization and, if so, how it is to be accessed. Like police records checks, the great danger of this device is the potential for false negatives. Only the smallest proportion of child abusers are ever detected and even fewer are charged and convicted. The absence of a record is not necessarily an indicator of harmlessness. This device should be used in combination with a range of other screening mechanisms wherever access to children is part of the position in question.

10. ***Driving Record Check.*** This screening mechanism is highly recommended wherever regular volunteer duties include operation of a motor vehicle or when volunteers will be transporting clients. It may or may not be a component of the police record check in your area.
11. ***Credit Bureau Check.*** This screening mechanism is recommended wherever volunteer duties include handling significant amounts of money or authority for significant financial transactions. Since credit bureau checks can reveal a good deal of highly confidential information, they should be used only when a candidate's financial history is demonstrably relevant to the position in question.
12. ***Performance Assessment.*** Though this mechanism, the volunteer demonstrates a specific skill required in the successful completion of the volunteer position, e.g., computer programming, typing, equipment usage, public speaking, etc. This is a useful way to check out skills and abilities the candidates claim to possess.
13. ***Medical Certification.*** When a position requires a specific physical capacity such as strength, stamina, fine motor coordination, night vision, etc., an organization may require volunteers to supply a physician's certification of fitness to perform the work in question. Proof of current immunization, a recent tuberculosis test, and so on would also fall under this type of screening device.
14. ***Orientation and Training Sessions.*** Orientation and training sessions can be very effective screening tools, particularly for positions where values, attitude, relationship style, and/or highly specialized skills are required. These attributes may take a while to assess and the exposure one gains to volunteers as they go through orientation and training sessions can provide the added opportunity needed to make the final screening decision. If used as a screening device, be sure to let the volunteer know in advance that the final decision will be made after the orientation/training is completed. It is aggravating to volunteers who make the extended commitment to orientation and training on the assumption that they have been accepted, only to find that they have still been undergoing the assessment process that screening entails. Further, if orientation/training sessions are to be used as part of the screening process, be sure to structure them to yield useful screening information. For example, if relationship style is part of what you are looking to assess, then integrate role plays, group work, and simulated work experiences into the orientation/ training plan and be certain that a qualified

screener is present to observe the results. If skill assessment is part of the screening objective, ask volunteers to actually perform tasks that demonstrate the requisite skills as part of the orientation/training process.

There is a wide range of other initial screening tools available. Devices such as proficiency tests and exams might be appropriate in some of the high-demand volunteer positions now on offer. Other mechanisms such as personality tests, honesty tests, lie-detector tests and so on are increasingly common in the hiring processes for executive positions in private companies, but most of these would be inappropriate, if not invasive of candidates' privacy, for the greatest majority of volunteer positions.

Since appropriate initial volunteer screening is an important element of risk management, care must be taken in the selection of screening devices to be used for each position, choosing those that will provide the information needed to make an informed decision about applicants' suitability.

This article is an excerpt from Linda L. Graff's book, *Best of All: the Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement*. (2005). Dundas, Ontario: Linda Graff and Associates.

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