The Short Course on Screening Protocol Design

by Linda L. Graff

Screening is an extremely complex topic, one that cannot adequately be addressed in a brief email exchange and so my comments will be less than complete. Let me offer some of what I think of as the 'big ideas" about screening for your consideration.

1. Screening is an important risk management tool as well as an essential human resources management function.

2. The thoroughness of the screening process should vary by the risks and demands of the position. How we screen a receptionist in a crisis centre will be both very different from, and probably less intensive than how we screen the telephone crisis counsellors in the same organization.

3. Hence, screening varies in both type and degree by position.

4. And therefore, screening protocol design must rest firmly on a comprehensive assessment of each position.

5. All of this applies equally to paid and unpaid positions.

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

7. When the position description is updated, review the position from the perspective of screening requirements. For example, ask questions such as:

- Are these positions of trust?
- Where are the risks?
- Where are the liabilities?
- Where/how can volunteers get themselves, others, the organization in harm's way?

There is a good position assessment tool in my book on screening. See reference below.

8. Because screening is fallible, costly, cumbersome and, at times, off-putting, it is advisable to reduce risks in every position as the first line of defence, then screen to whatever degree of risk remains. For example, rather than trying to screen extremely

intensely for a position that gives adults unsupervised access to children in isolated settings, consider how the risks might be mitigated first, e.g., have volunteers work in pairs, have volunteers work with more than one child at a time, engage parents as co-workers with volunteers, have the work take place on site (at your organization or somewhere else where supervision is available), etc. etc. So the sequence is as follows: position development, position-related risk/demand assessment, risk reduction and control, then screening protocol design.

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

10. When you know what you need to know, ask yourself where you find that information. Who could give you feedback on the specific things you need to know about. Organizations have a multitude of screening information sources available to them, e.g., written application form, resume, interview(s), reference checks, performance assessments, criminal record checks (often different levels of thoroughness are available - research how these work in your area), child abuse registry check (if available), driver's record abstract, qualifications check (including verification of licence currency), name search, credit bureau check, verification of employment history and other details provided by candidate, etc. etc.

The complexity of screening protocol design is in making the right choices from among the wide range of options.

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

12. Check the applicability of all legislation in your area. Does human rights legislation cover volunteer work? Do labour standards apply to unpaid workers? What constraints might be imposed on what and how you document your screening activities by privacy legislation in your jurisdiction? Even if the legislation does not apply, would it be the right thing to do to act as if it does apply?

13. Base your inquiries solidly on the requirements of the position. Do not ask about characteristics that have no relevance to what the candidate will do for you. Ask for a legal opinion when all of your screening tools have been drafted to ensure that what you're asking in the application form, interview(s), reference checks, and so on is legal.

14. Set all of the above in policy and ensure compliance with any pertinent legislation.

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

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

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

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

19. Since there are no absolute "right" screening designs that fit all organizations, the above process will help organizations to determine what is right for them. Keep in mind, however, that due diligence is often established, at least in part, by what the industry standard is at any given point. So be sure to stay current with the literature, and check (and keep checking periodically) with other organizations like yours across your province/state/country, and with other organizations in your local area. Find out what their screening process is for positions like those in your organization. It is a strategic error to assume that your screening process can be designed in isolation from what the rest of your community is doing since standards are increasing across the voluntary sector as well as in the courts and the court of public opinion.

When decisions have been made about screening, and the process outlined in, and approved as, policy, you've just begun the larger process of risk management. Here is

just a quick sampling of additional risk management techniques that may be available to you:

Be sure to work out clear boundaries around the position and the relationship. (More on this in my latest book, Best of All. Reference below.)

- Training is also a risk management strategy. Prepare your personnel well for the responsibilities they will assume. Consider making training mandatory for high-demand jobs. Take attendance at training to ensure volunteers complete the necessary program. Be sure to cover relevant policy issues in your training program, and include role plays and case studies to help volunteers understand what is both inside and outside of the role descriptions.
- Do not assume that working at a remote location makes supervision and monitoring impossible. For example, check in regularly with volunteers by phone, or on line. Have someone else check in with them for you - another, more senior volunteer, a staff person from that area, a staff person from another organization who is contracted to provide volunteer supervision for your organization.
- Don't forget to also check in with clients on a regular basis.
- Random spot checks are a good system of detecting problems and issues.
- Ongoing training provides opportunity to emphasize key values and boundaries as well as to upgrade skills.
- Volunteers working in pairs, or with buddies all the time or on a "ride along" basis gives you feedback on performance that you or other staff may not have time to gather directly.
- Require periodic "re-certification" on high end positions that involve a specific knowledge base.
- Many virtual volunteering work allows monitoring of conversations. Look into that possibility, and at least random check some interactions for all volunteers. Let them know you're doing so.
- Again, this is a long way from being a complete set of risk mitigation techniques, but they may give you a sense of how screening processes can be bolstered by additional position modifications and strategic volunteer program management practices.
- At the risk of sounding self interested, four of my books offer a good deal more background, along with dozens of useful tools, checklists, how to's and worksheets on screening, best practice in volunteer management, policy development, and risk management. The titles of relevance are:

  By Definition: Policy Development For Volunteer Programs
  Beyond Police Checks: The Definitive Volunteer & Employee Screening Guidebook
  Better Safe ... Risk Management For Volunteer Programs & Community Service
  BEST OF ALL: The Quick Reference Guide To Effective Volunteer Involvement

  I hope you find some of this helpful in your efforts to keep people safe.

Linda Graff has been working and consulting in the nonprofit sector since 1980. She is a voluntary sector and risk management specialist, an impassioned advocate for the field of volunteer program management, and a dynamic and in-demand international trainer.