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Using the job interview to ensure the
right staff fit for today—and tomorrow.



The hiring practices and processes of school nutrition operations are getting quite the workout of late. And if the grim predictions of some labor economists come to pass [Editors' Note: See "Help Really, Really Wanted," March 2022], recruitment will be an ongoing priority for many of you for some time to come. As the school year winds down, this is a good opportunity to reflect on how well your hiring processes have worked and where revised approaches might be helpful.

A good initial assessment is to consider the staff members you've hired in the last year or so. Are they genuine assets to your team, melding well, applying complementary strengths and a solid work ethic to their responsibilities? Or have they proven to be a poor fit, consuming time and good will, as you struggle to address a mix of inadequate skills and bad attitudes? While there's never a guarantee that a new hire is going to work out, abandoning or rushing **the interview process** will surely leave your program more vulnerable.

Skipping or minimizing this step can be quite tempting, especially when expediency is of the essence, and you are looking to make numerous hires at a job fair event. But human resource experts tend to agree that at least a nominal interview should be part of the process for the vast majority of positions. This exchange is a

critical opportunity for both the hiring manager and the candidate to gather information that can have a direct bearing on the success of the hire. A bad fit can be incredibly costly for your program—in more ways than one.

Most notably, you will invest *time* in onboarding any new employee. This runs the gamut from arranging and paying for required training programs (such as food handling and civil rights) to the investment by a supervisor or colleague in getting the newbie up to speed on the specifics of the site and the responsibilities of the job. There is also the time involved in getting the employee processed into systems for payroll, benefits, email, intranet access and so on. Just as you calculate meals per hour when determining the amount of time required to prepare a new menu item, the processes of onboarding and training are also calculated in dollars and cents. The U.S.



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Department of Labor estimates that the average cost of a bad hiring decision is at least 30% of the individual’s first-year expected earnings.

There are also costs that are less obvious to quantify but have equal impact. For example, there is an emotional investment by the entire team in working to integrate the new staffer into the group, building rapport and engagement. When there’s a bad fit, the individual’s supervisor also may spend valuable time and energy trying to manage poor performance issues. Replacing employees who do not (or should not) stay on can be a drain on productivity, leading to disrupted projects and a lack of continuity. There also can be an impact on overall team morale and stress.

Many factors contribute to hiring decisions, and the interview shouldn’t shoulder all the “fault” if a new employee doesn’t work out. But the job interview is one of the few steps in the process that truly brings the personal into personnel. Let’s take a look at some best practices for making the most of the job interview, whether you are recruiting for a part-time server, a cafeteria manager or a district chef.



INTERVIEW, NOT INTERROGATE

The interview should be an open and friendly process. Candidates shouldn’t be made to feel that you are trying to “trick” them with your questions. Setting the right tone from the very beginning is key. Put participants at ease with a warm, gracious and respectful welcome. Again, given that the current labor market favors candidates, you want to thank applicants for their interest in coming to work for your organization, whether it’s a school, district, nonprofit organization, vendor or state agency.

You might want to open with an icebreaker question (*see the box on page 4*) or reduce their



INSIGHTFUL QUERIES

You likely have a solid set of go-to interview questions, but if you're looking to shake up your list, here are 10 favorites that *School Nutrition* has collected from the internet, social media and our own files. (You may recognize some from our "Last Word" profiles!) A few are very generic, others seem on-point for a school nutrition position, and all can reveal aspects of a candidate's personality, creativity, work ethic, sense of humor and more.

- » What are some things that you enjoy cooking at home? (Note that the question doesn't ask what the candidate enjoys cooking "for your family" or "for your kids/grandkids." See the box on page 6 for more on guarding against questions that could result in legal trouble.)
- » Did you eat lunch when you were in school? If so, what was your favorite and why?
- » If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
- » Ask if they follow a particular sport; if it is one that is also familiar to you, ask: What team position do you think you'd be best-suited to play and why?
- » If you could go back in time, what advice would you give to your teenage self?
- » What are three words that a close friend or family member would use to describe you? Now share three words that a former supervisor would use to describe you.
- » If you had one week left to live, how would you spend it?
- » Of your former jobs, which one did you like most and which did you like least and why?
- » Do you like kids?

Recruiters suggest asking these types of questions at the beginning of the interview (to break the ice) and/or at the end (to finish on an upbeat note), but to limit them to just two or three overall for the right balance with situational and other more direct queries.

nerves by keeping the initial focus on introducing yourself and explaining your role in the organization or department. Keep in mind, however, that you should do more overall listening and less talking through the process. Even though you want candidates to know about you and the organization, it's important that the interview is geared toward bringing out the best in the individual, allowing them to leave the meeting feeling valued and listened to.

THE JOB AT HAND

Review the job in greater detail than was made available through the initial recruitment materials. Point out core responsibilities and working conditions. Use the job interview to establish very clear expectations for unique aspects of the job, from providing customer service to unkind kids and parents to the food handling restrictions around jewelry and nail polish to the amount of stand-

ing and lifting typically required in a kitchen. In a recent Facebook discussion group, one director noted that she has asked candidates if they are willing to go into the blast freezer—and been told "no" on more than one occasion!

Given longstanding misperceptions about work in a school cafeteria, you may want to start this part of the interview by asking the candidate, "Before I go into the job responsibilities, tell me a little about your impressions of what the job likely involves." This can help you tailor your spiel based on the candidate's level of knowledge. Plus, their initial answer combined with their responses to your description will provide some insight into the applicant's preparedness for jumping into action, as well as their willingness to learn.

Next, ask a few questions about the candidate's background and interest in the position. Your goal is to learn how they see themselves in relation to the job and what they



LET YOUR BEST GUIDE THE FUTURE

If this is your first time on the employer side of the job interview desk, it can be overwhelming to contemplate all the potential questions to ask in pursuit of the perfect fit—while still keeping the process streamlined in reflection of your time and the applicant's. In an interview with *Harvard Business Review*, HR expert John Sullivan, author of *1,000 Ways to Recruit Top Talent*, suggests building your job description and job interview questions by looking at current and former top performers on your team. What attributes do they have in common? How are they resourceful? How have they approached common challenges in the workplace? You may want to take this a step further and ask these star players to suggest questions you might ask job applicants for different position levels.

can contribute. Use their resume or application to ask questions related to former work experience that is most likely to have a bearing on your open position. For example, you might ask the candidate to share a career accomplishment that gives them great pride. But also ask questions about what's *not* on their resume or application ("Tell me something about you that it *isn't* on your resume.") It can also be helpful learn a candidate's reasons for leaving a past or current job.

Most hiring experts suggest asking a few scenario-based questions that will help you evaluate how they are likely to respond to situations they may encounter in your employ. Following are some generic and school nutrition-specific questions to consider. Be sure to tailor the question to the position level that is being recruited; some are geared to managers and supervisors.


- » A staff member comes to tell you that a coworker is taking food home. How would you handle the situation?
- » An upset parent calls when their child reports the cafeteria is always running out of favorite menu items or is serving cold, moldy or unpalatable food. How would you handle the

parent and then address the specifics of the claim?

- » Tell me about an occasion when you had to discipline an employee. What was the problem, how did you address it and what would you do differently next time?
- » How would you work through a disagreement between building leadership (the principal) and foodservice leadership?
- » Have you ever had a conflict with a coworker? How did you handle it?
- » Tell me about a mistake you made at home or on the job and how you learned from it.

TAKE CARE TO BE FAIR

Human resources leaders strongly recommend you use an identical list of questions for all candidates for a position or position level. This helps to ensure both consistency and objectivity in the hiring process. You may even want to create a rubric to score their responses based on criteria that you can apply, such as: demonstrates accountability, shows creativity, is solutions-oriented, prioritizes teamwork and so on. Scores can provide you with a quick means of weighing one candidate against another or

A vertical column of white line-art icons on a purple background. From top to bottom: two speech bubbles, a person at a desk with a speech bubble, two hands shaking over a document, three people at a table with speech bubbles, two speech bubbles, a person at a desk with a speech bubble, two hands shaking over a document, and two speech bubbles.

against a minimum standard that you've set in advance.

Even if you don't opt to create a scoresheet, be sure to take notes to reference later, especially if you are interviewing several candidates before making a selection. Pay attention to non-verbal cues, such as posture, alertness, dress and personal grooming. These can be added to your notes, but be sure to review the guidance in the box below for details that you should *not* document in writing.

TABLES TURNED

For you, the primary goal of the job interview is, of course, to assess applicants—but in the current employment climate, you have the added objective of ensuring the process is one that successfully makes the case for the candidate to choose *you*. Obviously, you'll highlight the benefits of the organization (district, agency, company, nonprofit) and the opportunities for job satisfaction and growth in the position. Whether or not you will be supervising the final hire, during

the interview you represent the entire potential of the experience, so be sure to be friendly, patient and open.

Encourage questions. A candidate's queries will tell you a lot about their levels of interest and engagement. Pay attention to how they respond to your answers—do they follow with further exploration or do they move on or shut down? Avoid being defensive if you are surprised or challenged by a question. Good candidates are paying attention to you and your reactions, too.

Finally, maintain perspective. The job interview certainly can be the first step in what may become a long and happy relationship marked by collaboration, creativity and achievement—and one that sometimes leads to personal friendships outside of the workplace. But don't lead with that kind of expectation; it's too much pressure! Stay focused on doing the best you can to ensure the process is fair and well positioned for the best possible outcomes. **SN+**

Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of School Nutrition.

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL, DON'T DISCUSS

There are federal, state and local rules to guard against discrimination in hiring. When conducting a job interview, you must be careful to avoid any discussion of certain aspects of a candidate's personal life. You can't ask questions that concern:

race	religion	age	ethnic background
gender	marital status	sexual orientation	national origin

This may seem obvious, but it can be deceptively difficult to navigate, especially if you and the candidate have quickly developed an easy-going rapport. It might feel natural to ask about a partner, children or what seems like an obvious shared cultural or religious background. It's even more difficult if the candidate volunteers information in one of these areas.

Let's say the candidate answers your "tell me about yourself" query with the following response: "My husband is deployed overseas, so I'm basically a single parent, although I do get a lot of help from the sisters and brothers of my Baptist church. Since my three children go to elementary school here in the district, I am excited about the opportunity to work with a schedule that more closely matches theirs."

The comments certainly reflect scenarios that might be quite common among your school nutrition team, and you may feel inclined to reassure the candidate that she or he is in very good company, but HR experts will advise you to politely avoid any such follow up—and, indeed, not to make any written notes about these details. Even though you may view this as a positive attribute in the candidate's favor for being a potential good fit, and not a reason against hiring them, it's still leaves you vulnerable in murky, legal waters. In this example, simply nod politely and move on to your next question and don't let the information factor into your decision in any way.

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