INTERVIEWING VOLUNTEER APPLICANTS FOR SKILLS

By Henry G. Pearson

Jessie is a volunteer in the hospital coffee shop. Someone at the other end of the counter is calling, "Miss! Oh, Miss!" She has let one coffee pot get too low. The phone rings incessantly with doctors' orders that take priority. She slops the coffee as she serves a grouchy customer. By early afternoon, she is making up an excuse to go home.

- Marcia had nursed and cherished pets all her life and was thrilled with her first week as a volunteer at an animal shelter. Then someone asked her to take her turn helping put to sleep the weekly quota of stray dogs. She broke into tears.
- Bill wanted to help people out and signed up for the suicide hot line. He felt good about talking someone out of killing himself one evening, but was totally frustrated the next day when the same person called him ten times.

What is the problem here? Were these volunteers really incompetent? Were the agencies desperate for help when they signed them up? Or was the workload too heavy, the hours unreasonable, the supervisor overly demanding? Or was the volunteer simply too inexperienced?

For two years I have conducted a seminar for the staff of volunteer agencies. The participants are those who actually interview applicants for volunteer jobs. In this seminar we explore the difficulties in determining in advance whether an applicant is qualified and can perform the tasks. We explain and demonstrate an interviewing technique that can help the interviewer make a better selection.

The mismatching of volunteers stems principally from the lack of effective interviewing techniques. The techniques used for screening applicants for paid jobs are hardly appropriate. Education and experience—made much of in a traditional hiring situation—often do not apply. Some of the best volunteers may simply not have what would seem to be the correct education and experience.

Indeed, most agencies pride themselves on providing the necessary on-the-job training. So lack of experience is not an issue. Likewise, agencies know that an applicant without the appropriate educational credentials, when motivated, can find ways to pick up the particular knowledge base. Moreover, most interviewers have discovered that the more they probe these two areas, the more likely they are to discourage the applicant who lacks them.

Just because education and experience credentials should not be prerequisites for volunteer job consideration, it does not mean that there should not be some other critical prerequisites. The problem is: What are they, and if known, how can they be identified? Finding the answers is the objective of this seminar.

What Are the Prerequisites?

The crucial prerequisites for volunteer openings are the *personal* skills needed to perform the tasks. These skills are the traits, characteristics, abilities and competencies that individuals carry with them all their lives and use effectively in a wide range of activities, whether at work or at play. These should become apparent to both applicant and interviewer *before* the placement is made.

For instance, Jessie, the harried lunch counter volunteer, should be able to keep cool and cheerful regardless of adversities. Marcia, the animal attendant, should have some objectivity to go with her compassion. And the hot-liner needs patience blended with firmness. Being cool, keeping cheerful, being objective, having compassion and patience, and being firm are all personal skills that are musts for these particular jobs. Yet, did anyone pinpoint them beforehand?

The second part of the problem is that neither applicant nor interviewer knows the technique for positively identifying such personal skills. The tendency of both parties is to search for similar kinds of experiences. Hopefully, Jessie might have worked in the school cafeteria. Wouldn't it be nice if Bill had had some telephoning experience? But this kind of experience may give false leads. Jessie may have been a poor cafeteria worker and not liked it; Bill's telephoning might have consisted of brief one-shot calls for a fundraising drive that he hated.

Identifying Skills

There is one positive clue, however, that both parties can search for. That clue consists of the activities that the individual has *really* enjoyed doing in life. When both interviewer and applicant start to explore some enjoyed experiences, they are also on their way to discovering what personal skills the applicant both enjoys and uses effectively.

To illustrate this principle, let us take Janet who came to the seminar. She used a two-step technique to identify her skills. First she described something she had really enjoyed doing—building her first vegetable garden in Boston's Fenway, a green area in the city.

She telephoned around until she found out how to rent a plot and get it rototilled. She planned a layout by studying books, pictures and others' plots. She planted, fertilized, pulled weeds, mulched, watched and waited. Eventually, she harvested a vegetable crop. A lone-wolf pas-

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time? Not at all. She exchanged garden lore with her abutters, negotiated a right of way, put up a common-ground fence, and shared her produce with friends. She obviously reveled in every hour of it. She also made something happen and demonstrated competence.

The second step in this technique was to find the personal skills that Janet used in this enjoyable experience. These are *not* the skills involved in the specialized knowledge of gardening, like selecting seeds, identifying bugs, and judging ripeness. Such skills are knowledge-based and apply strictly to the discipline of gardening.

The skills Janet had to find were her own personal competencies and traits. They would turn out to be skills she enjoyed because she used them in an experience she enjoyed. With the help of a checklist called "The Transkills Finder," she identified the following skills:

- Initiating*
- Coming up with ideas
- Innovating
- Researching
- Planning*
- Organizing*
- Designing
- Being physically active*
- Moving around*
- Using hands and tools*
- Making things
- Observing*
- Inspecting
- Being patient*
- Being artistic*
- Socializing*
- Negotiating
- Persuading*
- Being cooperative*
- Being enthusiastic*

Note these bear no exclusive relationship to the special knowledge-based skills of gardening. They are all transferable. People who initiate, as Janet did, can initiate non-garden projects. Organizers of one task can organize dissimilar tasks. The persuader is likely to persuade as a way of life. The only requirement is that the activity must be one that the person enjoys. Then the skills used become one's personal transferable skills.

To prove this point, Janet described another enjoyed experience—running programs at a home for the elderly. After outlining what she did there, she went through the 20 personal transferable skills she used in gardening and found that she had also used them as a program director.

Reinforcing this principle further, she told about volunteering to conduct a youth orchestra for the first time. The skills she used consistently for gardening, program directing, and orchestra conducting are starred with an asterisk on the list above.

The frequency with which these skills popped up when Janet did things she enjoyed developed into a pattern. The more of her enjoyed experiences she recalled, the more evident became the transferability of the skills she used and enjoyed. It did not seem to matter whether the activities were work or play, mind-boggling or trivial, in the past or present.

This concept and the technique for identifying skills are new to many people. They were invented by Bernard Haldane almost 40 year ago. He used them to help World War II GIs find employment when they had no pertinent civilian work experience. The technique was later popularized by Richard Bolles in his classic, *What Color is Your Parachute?* The use of transferable skills is also the principal theme of Howard Figler's *The Complete Job-Search*, and the author's *Your Hidden Skills: Clues to Careers and Future Pursuits* from which "The Transkills Finder" is excerpted. None of these books, however, discusses the technique as an aid to interviewing for volunteer positions. Yet exactly the same principle of transferable skills applies.

The Seminar in Interviewing

To demonstrate how transferable skills can help match applicants to volunteer openings, I led two seminars in the fall of 1983 and '84. The title was "Identifying Skills When Interviewing Applicants for Volunteer Positions." Twenty-one women and two men who had responsibility for interviewing took part. The agencies they represented were located in Greater Boston and were listed in the directory of the Voluntary Action Center of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay. These included:

- Correctional institution
- 4-H extension program
- Foster family network
- Arboretum
- Animal shelter
- Public school system
- Clinic
- Hospice-at-home
- Retarded adult program
- Family counseling
- Public library
- Library/museum
- Elder services
- Hospital
- Delinquent youth shelter
- Handicapped center

Workshop Outline

This five-hour workshop consisted of the five steps described below:

Step 1. Listing and describing enjoyed experiences by all the participants.
Step 2. Identifying the transferable skills used in these enjoyed experiences.
Step 3. Listing of tasks of the typical entry-level jobs in the agencies represented.
Step 4. Identifying the transferable skills required by these jobs.
Step 5. Lining up the applicants' skills with the job skills required to determine how good a match there was.

In addition to this structured agenda, the seminar had two process components. First, the participants learned the theory and practice by using themselves as examples. Thus, they gained insight into their own personal skills while they learned how the technique could be applied to applicants.

Second, each of the steps was first modeled by one person with the help of the leader. This modeling was followed by everyone trying it on their own. Here is a description of the actual seminar as it followed the five steps above:

Identification of Applicant's Transferable Skills

Step 1: The participants were asked to list one or two things that they had enjoyed or did enjoy doing. These were things that *they* felt they did well and were proud of. Some of these enjoyed experiences that the leader listed on the easel were learning Spanish, beachcombing, tutoring, playing word games, building a book case, setting up a computer program, sewing, running for election, leading a training group, and solving a bureaucratic problem.

The model for describing an enjoyed experience was Janet who told the story of her first garden in the Fenway.

After her demonstration, half of the participants simultaneously told their own particular stories to the person next to them. (When 12 people early in a seminar all converse for five minutes about something they like, there is no need for other introductions or ice-breakers!) Then the other half told their stories.

Step 2: Using Janet's story as a model, the leader, through questions and suggestions, posted the list of transferable skills she used (see above). Then the same paired participants used "The Transkills Finder" to check out the skills each had used in their respective enjoyed experiences.

Identification of the Job's Transferable Skills

Step 3: The model for describing the tasks for an entry-level volunteer job was provided by the director of volunteers for Massachusetts' Hospice-at-Home, Inc., who was assisting in the seminar. The job she described involved giving direct care to terminally ill patients. She divided the tasks into the three categories used by industrial engineers—the "get ready" (learning about the patient and family through briefing); "doing" (making regular visits, assessing situations and taking appropriate actions, handling crises and controversy); and "follow-up" (making periodic reports and evaluations and conferring with staff).

Step 4: Then she gave examples of the kind of personal transferable skills she looked for in an interview—compassion, empathy, quietness, good phone approach, calmness in crisis, good listener, tact and diplomacy, communicating and summarizing, and attention to details in evaluations.

Following these two demonstrations, the participants took 15 minutes to write a description of a typical entry-level job at their own agencies, as in Step 3, and to list the transferable skills needed

Matching Applicant Skills with Job Skills

Step 5: The Hospice-at-Home director then described an interview with an applicant for this job—that is, giving direct care to patients. She deliberately skipped all the traditional questions about background, education and work. Instead, she opened with a simple yet dumbfounding request. "Tell me some things you have done in your life that you have *really* enjoyed a lot and feel you did pretty well?"

This approach sets nervous applicants at ease. They do not have to apologize for lack of qualifications. Instead, they are invited to talk about things they know a lot about and like. What a difference in setting the tone of the interview!

This applicant described her love for taking care of plants and animals and teaching her grandchildren. She told about her term as church secretary, The director spotted caring, patience, empathy, being responsible, being sensitive to others' physical/psychological needs, as well as having good attention to detail and some organizational ability.

The last phase of Step 5, matching applicant skills to job skills, consisted of role-playing an interview—the segment of the interview dealing with determining skills. It was made clear that this part of the interview must come first and lead off with the question about activities the applicant had enjoyed. The aim of the role-play was not to come up with a decision to hire or not. The aim was simply to get a taste of telling or hearing about an enjoyed experience and looking for the transferable skills.

To set up the interviews—all conducted at once—half the group held up signs advertising the entry-level jobs for which they had written descriptions. The other half sorted themselves out and applied for jobs that appealed to them. Here is how a typical role-played interview was reported.

A 4-H extension agent was looking for a volunteer to help train young people in heading up projects. He asked the applicant to discuss something she enjoyed. She told how she had at one time taken on coaching a group of boys in soccer. She had never played the game. He made a mental note of the skill of risk-taking. Furthermore, she got the kids to tell her what they needed to learn and then followed their counsel. Listening, learning and innovating jumped to mind.

Only afterwards did he find out that she was working at a local foster family network. But if they had discussed this first in the traditional manner, they might never have hit on the crux—that she could don the leadership role of an unfamiliar group in an unfamiliar activity.

Role-playing is an imperfect exercise, but it does give the participants as interviewers a feel for launching an interview in this friendly and informal way, listening carefully to a story, analyzing for skills, and comparing them to those required by the job.

Follow-Up

Not everyone grasps the concept of transferable skills firmly enough from one exposure to dare to use it as an interview opener. It is certainly foreign to what each party is used to. But after each seminar there were a few who reported six months later, in response to a follow-up questionnaire, that they had tried it and it worked.

An interviewer for the Elder Service Corps said she always starts out with this question now. She simply gets them talking right away about something they like. One of the group observed, "You really get to things people want to talk about right at the start. It's non-threatening." Another wrote, "I found a woman who talked a great deal about how she loved to explore around in the outdoors; she is now a very good volunteer for the arboretum."

The director of volunteers of the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, who assisted at one seminar, described how the process helps when the applicant feels inadequate.

"A very timid widow came to the Library/Museum about eight months ago, not long after her husband had died of a sudden illness. He had just retired and they had been looking forward to doing many of the things they had planned for years. She desperately wanted to keep busy in a new environment, one which she had not shared with her husband. However, she felt very inadequate because she had not worked for many years and she didn't know what she had to offer. She kept saying that she couldn't type.

"I got her to talk about some of the things she had done that had given her satisfaction: selecting wallpaper and papering her dining and living rooms with grasscloth papers—she wouldn't let anyone do it for her because it would drive her crazy if it weren't done right; teaching arts and crafts; creating a pantry in a kitchen closet and organizing her spices alphabetically.

"Some of the transferable skills we identified in these stories were: (1) artistic, manual; (2) explaining, presenting; (3) organizing, attention to detail, order. All of them added up to a placement in the museum's storage area, cataloguing museum objects, and later assisting with exhibits."

Some By-Products

One of the by-products of the two seminars reported in the questionnaire was how the participants had gained insight into their own personal development. They had made some discoveries about themselves.

"This approach opened my eyes to the various skills I have, but never considered," said one. Another added, "It helped me grow in confidence, to identify both my personal strengths and weaknesses." Another reported she had developed enough confidence to go to her boss and ask to take on new responsibilities.

A fourth actually used the technique to change careers. She analyzed the skills she most enjoyed using in her social agency work and then translated them into her newly found sales job, "which required many of the same skills and which allowed me to grow professionally and personally." What is more, she reported she now uses the technique in her sales

job when interviewing potential buyers!

There were some other serendipitous uses reported, too, such as helping nursing home residents find pleasurable activities, assigning tasks to board members, and helping young adults make decisions.

Conclusions

It is clear from the seminars and the feedback that interviewers gain new knowledge about interviewing from the technique. By applying it to themselves, they learn how their applicants might also gain insights and confidence. The likelihood of a disappointing and frustrating interview is reduced. Fruitless questions and answers about irrelevant education and work are by-passed and the usual escalating feeling of inferiority is minimized. Instead, there is always something profitable for the applicant to talk about, the interviewer to listen to, and both to feel positive about.

The technique, furthermore, forces the interviewer to focus on what kind of transferable skills the job really does require. With these in mind, the interviewer is in a better position to search for them and share them. The result is that both parties gain insights into the individual's strengths and the job's needs, and out of this understanding comes an improved matching process.

THE TRANSKILLS FINDER

WORDS
Reading
Writing
Conversing
Interviewing

NUMBERS
Calculating
Working with figures
Estimating
Handling money
Buying/shopping

ARTISTIC ABILITIES
Using artistic talents
Being creative
Sensing beauty through eyes/ears
Interpreting feelings, ideas, sights, sounds

MECHANICAL/TECHNICAL ABILITIES
Making machines and mechanical things work
Applying knowledge to technical things

THE BODY
Coordinating eyes/body
Being physically active
Applying strength
Moving around
Coordinating eyes/hands
Using hands
Operating things/tools
Using fingers
Building/making
Repairing/fixing

THE SENSES
Observing
Examining
Inspecting
Visualizing
Listening/hearing
Touching/feeling

THE MIND

Original Thinking
Coming up with ideas
Using imagination
Improvising/inventing

Intuitive Thinking
Sizing up
Having insight

Gaining Knowledge
Learning
Investigating/researching
Memorizing
Recalling
Analyzing

Thinking Ahead
Planning/goal setting
Using foresight
Being logical/reasoning
Problem solving/decision making involving:
- people
- information
- things
- ideas

BEING ORGANIZED

Organizing
Starting things up
Scheduling
Following up
Persisting
Getting result(s)
Meeting demands

Attending to detail
Being thorough/careful
Being accurate/exact
Using system
Being neat/orderly
Using clerical skills
Keeping records
Maintaining routines

SELF-DIRECTING
Asserting self
Taking risks
Taking on responsibility
Being independent
Being self-disciplined
Keeping cool

RELATIONS w/OUTDOOR & NATURAL WORLD
Taking care of living things
Raising/training living things
Dealing with elements/nature

RELATIONS WITH OTHERS

Persuading
Influencing
Selling
Promoting
Negotiating
Bargaining

Performing for Others
Entertaining
Speaking
Using showmanship
Demonstrating

Helping Others
Being of service
Serving
Volunteering
Doing favors
Meeting others' physical needs
Being sensitive
Guiding/advising
Encouraging
Being patient

Taking Direction
Getting and delivering things
Adapting to others
Following directions

Instructing
Training/coaching
Teaching
Explaining
Informing

Leading
Directing others
Managing
Motivating
Being responsible for others' actions

Associating
Cooperating
Sharing
Contacting
Consulting with
Being tactful
Socializing
Being friendly
Making joint effort

Being Competitive
Winning
Contending