Hiring Child Welfare Caseworkers: Using a Competency-Based Approach*

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Abstract

This paper describes the development and implementation of a competency-based hiring and selection system for child welfare caseworkers in the state of Maine. The design of the process was a collaborative effort among the state Bureau of Human Resources, the Department of Human Services, and the authors who were on the staff of the university-based Child Welfare Training Institute. The selection process utilizes data from a research-based competency model and includes multiple assessments. Two rounds of internal validity studies were conducted to assess the reliability of the approach. Results demonstrated a high level of inter-rate reliability.

In Maine, as in most states, the merit system established to ensure a fair hiring and selection process is cumbersome and inefficient. The challenges presented by this process are exacerbated in positions such as the child welfare caseworker where turnover is extremely high (Balfour & Neff, 1993).

The problems that Maine child welfare supervisors experience with the traditional process are summarized in Table 1, *below.* A list of eligible candidates for employment, or register, was open continually. Candidates for child welfare caseworker positions

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applied at any time; their application was scored using a Training and Experience (T&E) rating; and they were then placed on the register. As vacancies occurred in the regions, the hiring supervisor requested the top six names on the register. Only after all six had been interviewed could additional names be requested. If all six were rejected, they still remained in their position at the top of the register on the basis of their T&E score. When a new vacancy occurred, they were re-interviewed due to the existing certification rules. As a result, positions remained open for several months, creating higher caseloads for other caseworkers and exacerbating the burnout/turnover spiral.

The lack of standardized hiring practices across the state created the need to conduct interviews whenever a specific vacancy occurred. Without clear criteria of what they were looking for in the selection interview, supervisors subjected candidates to protracted interviews, only to reject them as not acceptable. Without statewide agreement on screening criteria, the same applicants were interviewed in several different regions. And without valid criteria for rejection, the register was filled with "deadwood"—candidates who had been interviewed several times and rejected.

Frustration with the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the system was widespread when in spring 1995, the Maine State Bureau of Human Resources informed the Department of Human Services (DHS) of its willingness to try a new approach. The redesign process became a collaborative effort. Child welfare supervisors and managers acted as subject matter experts in the design of a job-related process that would meet the needs of their peers. The Maine State Bureau of Human Resources staff provided expertise on state merit system requirements and University of Southern Maine staff provided expertise on competency-based assessment approaches.

Proposed Process

The new system would be very different, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Comparison of the Old and Proposed
Hiring and Selection Process

Current Hiring Process	Proposed Hiring Process
No pre-screening beyond T&E rating	Pool of pre-screened candidates
Multiple interviews of same candidates by individual supervisors	One-time pre-screening by panels of trained interviewers
Deadwood on register	Regular cleaning out of register
Lack of valid screening criteria	Valid screening criteria
No statewide standards	Standardized, statewide process
Lengthy time to fill vacancies	Shorter time to fill vacancies
Time-consuming process	More efficient process

The register would be opened only twice a year—once in the spring and again in the fall. Applications would still be scored using the T&E rating. A list of the top-ranked candidates would be provided to each region. The number of names on that list would be based upon the regional manager's projections of the number of vacancies that would occur over the following six months. These candidates would then be pre-screened by panels of three supervisors. This pre-screening would represent an additional level of scoring, which would allow the candidates to be placed in rank order on a hiring list for that region. As a specific vacancy opened up, the hiring supervisor could choose to either select the top candidate from the hiring list or re-interview the top three

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candidates. Any candidates remaining on the list at the end of the six-month period could choose to remain or remove their names from that list. Once a year, all the names would be removed from the register.

With this redesign of the administration of the hiring process, the Maine State Bureau of Human Resources recommended designing a screening process that would be standardized statewide. It was at this point that the authors became involved and advocated the design of a process that would be both research-based and meet the needs of busy practitioners. The following principles informed the design: it must be based on job analysis; it must focus on specific competencies; it must use multiple, job-related assessments; it must have a variety of questions; and it must be standardized. Each of these principles is described below.

Job Analysis
As Campion notes (Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1997), job analysis is a basic requirement for developing valid selection procedures according to both professional (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 1987) and legal (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978) testing guidelines. Job analysis, by definition, enhances the job-relatedness of the screening process, thus making it more credible to supervisors who are familiar with the requirements of the position.

Focus on Specific Competencies
However, job analysis provides necessary but insufficient information in deciding whether an applicant is best qualified for the job in question. Competency-based recruiting systems stress the need to identify competencies that are most likely to predict long-term success on the job and that are difficult to develop through either training or experience. As in Spencer's vivid description, "you can teach a turkey to climb a tree, but it's easier to hire a squirrel" (Spenser & Spenser, 1993). Berman and Motowidlo (1992) further argue that selection criteria should embrace a domain of organizational behavior broader than just task activities. They should also include contextual activities—such pro-social organizational behavior as putting in extra effort on the

job, persistence, cooperating with others, following organizational rules and procedures, and supporting organizational objectives.

In addition, studies of child welfare caseworkers have identified a relationship between personal characteristics and turnover. The characteristics that correlate with caseworker retention are: self-efficacy motivation (energy and persistence in overcoming obstacles to accomplish goals); personal responsiveness to the needs of clients (doing for others); and goodness of fit (personal job competence) (Ellett, Ellett, Kelley & Noble, 1996; Ryecraft, 1994).

Multiple, Job-Related Assessments
The limitations of the traditional interview in predicting job performance have been well documented. The validity of the interview is improved by adding structure (from .29 for unstructured to .62 for structured interviews) (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt & Maurer, 1994; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988). But even a well-designed structured interview is limited in terms of the opportunities to observe competencies, such as written communication, time management, and organizational skills. The validity of the screening process is increased when a range of job-related assessments are included (Guion, 1998; Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Thorton, 1992).

Variety of Questions
Different types of questions are used in screening interviews: situational ("what would you do if"); behavioral ("what did you do when"); background ("what experience have you had similar to this job"); opinions (including self-perceptions of strengths, weaknesses); and job knowledge. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Campion et al. (1997) conclude that situational and past behavior questions are equally valid. While questioning the vagueness of opinion questions, they recommend that a range of questions be used in a structured interview format.

Standardization
The importance of standardization is supported by both psychological testing principles and EEO requirements (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978; Society for

Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 1987). Standardization includes the following components: asking the same questions in the same order of all candidates; using the same interviewers; providing the same opportunities to each candidate (including controlling the length of the interview); and limiting prompting, follow-up questions, and elaboration on answers.

The Research Base
Fortunately, the groundwork for developing a competency-based screening process of child welfare caseworkers already existed in the form of a caseworker competency model (Bernotavicz, 1994a). The holistic competency model was based on a three-pronged approach: Functional Job Analysis (Fine, 1989) identified the functional or task-related knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs); Behavioral Event Interviews (Spenser & Spenser, 1993) revealed the characteristics of outstanding performers; and an Organizational Assessment (including the examination of policy and procedures manuals and a survey of the organizational culture and climate) identified context knowledge and skills.

This model, which included thirty-four competencies, was refined over a period of two years with the participation of groups of subject matter experts (SMEs) and was used in the design of the curriculum for a twenty-day competency-based pre-service program (Bernotavicz, 1994b). In December 1994, in anticipation of possible use of the model for hiring and selection purposes, a survey was sent to all caseworkers and supervisors asking them to rate the competencies according to three factors:

1. Competencies necessary upon entry to the job;
2. Competencies that should be emphasized in pre-service training; and
3. Competencies that should be addressed in the in-service training program.

The Collaborative Design Process
In March 1995, the Maine State Bureau of Human Resources met with a group of DHS casework supervisors and the authors to discuss a revised hiring process. Representatives of the state's five geographical regions and the three separate program

areas (child protective services, foster care, and adoption) were present. Although the supervisors were initially skeptical of the possibility of a standardized statewide approach, they were also sufficiently frustrated with the current system to be willing to try something new.

At that meeting, the authors stressed the importance of clarity about the criteria used in the screening process and suggested using brainstorming to identify the competencies that the supervisors thought were required upon entry into the position. Following the discussion, the results of the survey described above were distributed to the group, and a very high level of agreement was found to exist between the two sets of data. The child welfare caseworker competency model (Bernotavicz, 1994a) was then employed as the basis for refinement of the criteria as well as selection of the behavioral indicators that could be observed during the interview process.

Recognizing that screening becomes more accurate and manageable when raters can focus on fewer competencies (Mitrani, Dalziel, & Fitt, 1992), the group selected nine competencies from the thirty-four in the child welfare caseworker competency model: Interpersonal Skills, Self-Awareness/Self-Confidence, Analytic Thinking, Flexibility, Observational Skills, Job Commitment/Child Welfare Values, Communication Skills, Results Orientation, and Child Welfare Technical Knowledge. The three components of the Selection Index and competencies addressed are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2
Caseworker Screening Index

Competencies to Be Rated	Standard Interview	Fact-Finding Interview	Written Exercises
Interpersonal Skills: how candidate relates to interview team; expression of ideas and feelings; acknowledgement of others' feelings; evidence of respect and empathy for others.	√	√	–
Self-Awareness/Confidence: reference to own strengths, limitations, personal style, familial background; decisive in ambiguous or chaotic situations; maintains composure under stress.	√	√	–
Analytic Thinking: information-gathering skills; use of range of sources; hypothesis formation; conceptual frameworks; looking beyond superficial explanations.	√	√	√
Flexibility: ability to adapt styles and shift gears; evidence of coping skills; openness to new information.	√	√	–
Observational Skills: ability to observe and identify key elements; recognition of inconsistencies; factual descriptions; accurate observations.	–	√	√
Job Commitment/Child Welfare Values: enthusiasm, genuine interest in job; firm values/beliefs about protecting children; sense of responsibility; self-motivation; perseverance; positive attitude.	√	–	√

Competencies to Be Rated	Standard Interview	Fact-Finding Interview	Written Exercises
Communication Skills: open, clear communication; attentive listening; clarity of written summary and recommendations.	√	√	√
Results Orientation: ability to assess/reprioritize; use of time management tools; persistence; thoroughness; completion of task on time.	–	√	√
Technical Skill/Knowledge: evidence of knowledge and/or experience in child welfare.	√	√	√

The first component in the selection index to be designed was a structured interview. All supervisors were polled and asked to submit the interview questions that they currently used and to identify those that they thought most useful. A subcommittee met to draft the interview questions, which the larger group then fine-tuned. Three types of questions were designed:

1. **Opinions:** These questions relate to the candidates' views of children and families, as well as their self-awareness and values.
2. **Situational:** Based on the premise that the best predictor of future performance is past behavior, these questions ask candidates to describe experiences in the past similar to critical job incidents.
3. **Scenarios:** The purpose of these questions is to elicit evidence of the candidates' analytical ability, their thinking process, and their judgment.

To increase face validity and encourage acceptance of the new process, every effort was made to incorporate questions currently used by supervisors into the interview. Once the structured interview had been designed, the group moved on to design other selection tools to round out the selection index. Since investigative skills and the ability to make sound judgments and to synthesize

information are critical components of a child welfare caseworker's job, the group agreed upon the need for job sample tests to screen for these competencies. A fact-finding interview and a written exercise were designed based on a case study of a fictional family. Pilot tests of the fact-finding and written exercise were conducted on two volunteers with no job experience in child welfare and then appropriate revisions made.

The Screening Process
Review of Case Materials
When the candidate arrives for the interview, he or she is taken to a quiet room where instructions about the process are. The candidate is given a folder with the incomplete case study materials and allotted thirty minutes to read the information and prepare for the fact-finding interview.

Focused Interview
This second phase consists of a forty-five-minute interview conducted by a panel of three casework supervisors who ask thirteen standardized questions in turn.

Fact-Finding Interview
The candidate is then directed by a member of the panel to ask questions pertaining to the case material that the candidate read earlier. Here the focus shifts from the candidate's ability to respond to questions to the ability to ask questions, probe for information, shift gears, and identify key facts. Fifteen minutes is allotted for the fact-finding interview during which one member of the panel serves as the resource person and has available in a folder additional information on the case. The other panel members observe the candidate's performance and screen for competencies, including the number of key facts the candidate elicits.

Written Exercise
The candidate returns to the quiet room to produce a case analysis that includes a summary of the facts in the case, problem statement, conclusions, and recommendations. At the end of thirty

minutes, the applicant's written responses are collected and returned to the members of the interview panel for rating.

Rating of Competencies

Panel members are instructed to rate the candidate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being high. The structured interview is weighted by a factor of two because it provides the most amount of contact with the candidate. The scores for each of the components are added to produce a composite score. The three members of the interview panel combine their composite scores and take the average to reach one final score for each candidate. Discussion of different ratings provides the opportunity to clarify what was observed and the evidence used. This score is used to rank order the applicants and determine who will be invited back for a second interview from which the final decision to hire is made.

Training the Interview Panels

By April 1995, a final screening process and rating instrument were ready to be implemented. Thirty supervisors who would serve on the interview panels attended a one-day training. Like the design, the training was a collaborative effort, with units presented by the Maine State Bureau of Human Resources and university staff, as well as supervisors who had served on the committee. Topics included: the development of the selection index, a review of the tools (i.e., interview questions, case study information, resource person material, etc.), common interview errors, using the competencies and behavioral indicators for screening, the rating form, a video presentation of a sample structured interview and a fact-finding interview, review of sample written summaries, developing a summary rating, and logistical arrangements for conducting interviews. The training covered both the theoretical context for the development of the selection index, as well as opportunities for the participants to experience hands-on use of the tools.

Reliability and Internal Validity Studies

The new hiring and selection process was implemented statewide in May 1995. A research study of the process was conducted to

determine the internal validity of the model. The highest possible score that a candidate could achieve through the rating process is 140*;* the lowest possible score required for a candidate to be considered for a position is 84. The cut-off score was determined by averaging the score that a candidate would receive if he or she were to be given the average score (3) in every single category.

DHS Regions I, III, IV, and V conducted interviews with a total of 87 candidates. Region II did not participate in the interviews due to their decision to accept rating sheets from other regions for candidates who applied for positions there. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that there was no significant difference in the average scores between regions.

Nine candidates interviewed in more than one region; some interviewed in all four. Only one of the nine candidates who participated in multiple interviews raised his or her score high enough to make it over the cut-off point. Four of the nine candidates did raise their scores slightly, but the remaining five actually lost ground during subsequent interviews. This demonstrates that candidates who are exposed to the screening process on more than one occasion did not appear to benefit.

For each of the four regions, inter-rater reliability was examined by correlating each rater's total score for each candidate with every other rater's score. The correlations between raters range from .550 to .970, with a majority over .7. These scores, with correlations becoming significant at p=.001, indicate very high levels of agreement between raters for overall candidate scores. In other words, members of interview teams were in accordance in terms of how the applicant was performing on the selection index, and used the rating sheets consistently to record that level of performance.

In addition to inter-rater reliability on candidate's overall scores, this issue was also examined by specific competency. While each region showed fairly high overall inter-rater agreement, two competency areas correlated consistently low: Results Orientation and Job Commitment/Child Welfare Values.

To get feedback on supervisors' reaction to the new approach, interviews were conducted on the telephone or in person with a stratified random sample of eleven supervisors (50% of the interviewers). Comments were generally positive about the

structure and format of the screening process. Though initially uncomfortable with the use of the five-point Likert scale, the supervisors reported reaching consensus regarding ratings through a discussion process.

In September 1995, the Caseworker Screening Committee met once again to discuss the findings of the data analysis and to fine-tune the selection instruments before beginning another round of training. For example, the wording on some of the structured interview questions was altered to make the questions clearer, and additional behavioral anchors for the situational questions were generated. In October, another training session was held for the interview teams to review the changes and train new members.

A second quantitative analysis of the rating sheets was conducted upon completion of this round of interviews. Once again, there was no significant difference, as determined by analysis of variance (ANOVA), in candidates' average scores between the five DHS regions. Of the three candidates who interviewed in two regions, only one raised the score in the second interview. For this candidate, the most notable performance increase was in the Fact-Finding interview. This finding provided support for the argument that candidates' scores be accepted between regions, thereby increasing the efficiency of the process by eliminating the need for multiple interviews of the same individual.

In the second round of analysis, inter-rater reliability was once again examined and was compared with the data from the first set of interviews. Correlations between raters ranged from .637 to 972 in round two, with a preponderance of values above .7. This indicates a very high level of agreement between raters for overall scores.

The overall trend of the data in the second round demonstrated a slightly higher correlation between raters in all competency areas, perhaps providing evidence that practice with rating competencies improves the reliability of the process. There were no correlations below .6 in round two.

In preparing for round three of interviews in spring 1996, the authors anticipated that supervisors would request major changes. However, this did not occur, so the materials appear to be meeting the need for an efficient and effective screening process.

Summary

The redesign of the screening process was a collaborative effort. The Bureau of Human Resources and the University of Southern Maine joined forces with the end users in the Department of Human Services to tackle a major source of frustration. A pre-screened pool of candidates is available when a vacancy occurs; the new process has reduced the time to fill vacancies. Further, the time spent by supervisors on screening has been reduced. Other benefits have also occurred. Using competencies in the screening process provides the opportunity for supervisors to communicate about good practice and to hone their own observational and analytical skills. The level of trust and coordination statewide has improved as supervisors recognize that the rating of candidates in the various geographical regions is consistent. Further, through training of interviewers and standardization of the process, the vulnerability to discriminatory behavior has been reduced.

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When this study was conducted, both authors were on the staff of the Maine Child Welfare Training Institute. The Institute is a collaborative program of the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine and the Maine Department of Human Services, One Post Office Square, P.O. Box 15010, Portland, ME 04112.

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