

CIVIL CONVERSATIONS #2

APPLICANT SCREENING

The National Institutes of Health is committed to providing a workplace that is free from violence, threats of violence, and intimidating or harassing behavior. Effective pre-employment screening is a critical part of workplace violence prevention. This guidance is intended to assist managers and supervisors (selecting officials) with screening applicants for potential workplace violence indicators.

Clearly, no one can predict with certainty how an applicant will perform once hired, and no screening mechanism is an absolute predictor of employee behavior. This guidance is intended to trigger a proactive response from managers who might otherwise miss important clues. It is critical that Human Resources (HR) advisors and managers maintain good communications and collaboratively problem-solve throughout the hiring process and after the applicant begins work.

YOUR ROLE AS SELECTING OFFICIAL

1. **Review the employment application before making a decision to hire.** Consider:
 - Frequent job changes without an appropriate explanation
 - Frequent or poorly explained periods of unemployment
 - Provision of inaccurate and/or conflicting information
 - Poorly explained reasons for leaving prior positions, and
 - Any prior criminal activities noted.

2. **Conduct an applicant interview before making a decision to hire.** Ask about work accomplishments and consider asking some of these questions:
 - What were positive and negative aspects of working with your last employer?
 - What if anything would you change in your present job?
 - Describe how you handled a stressful or controversial situation.
 - Describe a situation where you had to tell someone you could not do what had been requested.
 - Provide an example of your ability to problem-solve.
 - How would you respond if someone else received credit for your work?

Other considerations:

If you decide to ask some of these questions, be consistent. Ask the same ones of all applicants. Consider asking applicants to provide references including supervisors, clients, and peers. You can ask the applicant if he/she can provide copies of performance evaluations from previous positions held. While applicants are not required to do so, their explanations may be helpful in learning more about their past employment. Inform them that providing evaluations is optional.

3. **Check references including current and former employers, customers, and peers.** Consider asking about:
 - The applicant's strengths and weaknesses
 - The quality of the applicant's relationships with supervisors/clients/peers
 - The applicant's leave usage, if speaking to a supervisor, and
 - Rehiring potential, if speaking to a supervisor.

Use the reference checks as an opportunity to validate or clarify information received from applicant interviews, applications, or other sources. Note that some employers may only provide confirmation of employment or terminations.

IMPORTANT:

Selecting Officials should establish and maintain effective channels of communication with their HR staff throughout the hiring process. See the HR advisor immediately about any information received that causes concern. Remember that most applicants who are new to the federal government serve an initial probationary period of one year. Contact the HR advisor promptly during this time frame, if problems surface.

THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

When new non-federal applicants have been selected:

Most NIH appointments require applicant fingerprinting and background investigations. After a Selecting Official has made a selection, the IC HR staff completes the fingerprints and submits the paperwork to initiate background investigations. These background checks, conducted by the FBI, may indicate criminal history (arrest records/convictions) or other employment concerns.

Note: Background checks can serve as key indicators of employment application falsification or other problems.

When employees are not “cleared” for work:

- ❑ In most cases, negative or controversial information obtained from background investigations will not be received until after the employee has started work. Typically, the employee is provided an opportunity to explain these findings.
- ❑ As each case is unique, the HR staff should consider the issues carefully and consult with management and other officials as appropriate to determine the best course of action.

When new federal applicants have been selected:

The HR staff will obtain information from the applicant’s current employer concerning suspensions and other official adverse actions, if any. The HR staff will also determine whether or not background checks previously have been conducted.

For more information on this Conversation, call CIVIL on 301-402-4845.