



**Tools for Hiring Successful School Foodservice Assistants**

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*Building the Future Through Child Nutrition*

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## TOOLS FOR HIRING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL FOODSERVICE ASSISTANTS

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### Successful Long-Term Employee Skills

Organizations that attract and retain the best employees enjoy a significant advantage over other organizations. One method to secure the “best employee” for school foodservice positions is to focus the employment process on the skills needed by the employee. To determine these skills, the Applied Research Division of the National Food Service Management Institute conducted a study involving focus groups with directors and managers and a national survey of directors (Meyer, 2002). The skills identified as most important for foodservice assistants were:

- \$     **Communication Skills**
  - able to follow instructions
  - able to accept constructive feedback
  - able to give clear instructions
  
- \$     **Interpersonal Skills**
  - likes children
  - relates well to the child as a customer
  - gets along with others
  - enjoys working with the public
  - does not gossip about others on the job
  
- \$     **Work Ethic**
  - dependable
  - honest
  - team player
  - willing to learn
  - willing to accept directions
  - takes responsibility for their own actions
  - accepts change
  - shows commitment to the job
  - flexible
  - takes the initiative to accomplish tasks
  
- \$     **Attitude**
  - hardworking
  - self-motivated
  - willing to go beyond the requirements of the job when needed
  - cheerful

\$ Educational Skills  
    able to read  
    able to do math

\$ Physical Health  
    free from infectious disease  
    clean and appropriately dressed for work  
    physically able to stand on a hard surface for a specified period of time  
    physically able to lift a specified weight

Employment applications, background checks, tests, and interviews are the most frequently used tools found in the human resource literature for assessing an applicant's ability to perform a particular job. These tools can be useful for assessing the skills of potential school foodservice employees. A comprehensive selection process should involve at least two tools. By using at least two tools, a check and balance system can be built into the process. The school foodservice director should look for congruence when using the employment application, background check, tests, and interview. If the employee receives favorable comments from a previous employer and scores high on the interview, he or she may be a suitable potential employee. However, if an employee has several gaps of work history on the employment application, scored slightly low on the interview, and the previous employer prefers not to provide information about the employee's work behavior, this may be an unsuitable employee.

The first step in using the tools provided in this resource is to identify the skills from the previously identified list that are most important for the job. Many skills are identified and all may not be important in every situation. Select the five to eight skills that are most important in your operation. These skills should be the focus of the selection process; all phases and tools used should assess these skills.

Included in this resource is information about the employment application, background check, tests, and interview. Each of these hiring tools will be discussed and linked to the appropriate recommended skill for school foodservice assistants. Many employees hired for school foodservice assistant positions have never worked outside of the home. Because this potential pool of employees does not have experience in the "working world," interview questions and reference checks may need to be different. Tips on the selection process used with this applicant pool will also be discussed.

Prior to the application of any tools recommended in this resource, the local school board policies and procedures should be consulted. All guidelines established by the local school board should be followed.

### **Employment Applications**

Well-designed employment applications can provide a wealth of information about potential employees as well as serve as an initial screening tool. Employment applications should address questions designed to obtain information that will help the employer decide whether the applicant meets the minimum qualifications for the job. Questions should relate to

the applicant's potential to perform the job and the skills identified as most important. Therefore, employers should ask only relevant, job-related questions on applications. Questions related to specific skills identified as important for a particular job can be asked. Examples may include: the ability to read, do basic math, stand on hard surfaces for specified periods of time, and lift specific weights. If a driver is being hired, an important question is about his or her driving record. Two sample methods of assessing these skills in the employment application are provided.

### **Method 1**

Ask the applicants on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 = poor and 5 = excellent to rate themselves on the ability to:

- Read the local newspaper.
- Do basic math such as add, multiply, and divide.
- Stand on a hard surface for 3-4 hours at a time.
- Lift a 30-pound box.
- Adapt to change.
- Accept directions from the manager or director.
- Motivate themselves.
- Drive safely.

### **Method 2**

Ask the applicants to answer yes or no to the following questions:

- I am able read the local newspaper.
- I am able do basic math such as add, multiply, and divide.
- I am physically able to stand on a hard surface for 3-4 hours at a time.
- I am physically able to lift a 30-pound box.
- I am able to adapt to change without complaining.
- I motivate myself better than others motivate me.
- I am free from any infectious diseases.
- I have a good driving record with no accidents in the last five years.

One disadvantage of asking potential employees these questions is possible bias from self-reporting. But, when the employment application is used in combination with another tool such as an interview or background check, there is a check and balance system, thus reducing the bias.

Employers should avoid asking questions about race, religion, gender, age, national origin, citizenship, arrest record, disability, marital status, or union affiliation. If prior experience is not necessary to perform the essential skills of the job, questions about prior experiences should not be asked.

The courts and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) have determined that the following questions are also unlawful (Bland & Stalcup, 1999).

- \$ Are you pregnant?
- \$ Do you have any children?
- \$ Are you planning to have children?
- \$ Are you married?
- \$ What type of child care arrangements do you have?
- \$ Do you have a car?

Under Title VII, questions regarding the financial status of applicants are considered unlawful unless they are job related. Asking if an applicant has ever been arrested violates Title VII because such inquiries tend to adversely affect black and Hispanic applicants. However, employers may ask about job-related criminal convictions (Bland & Stalcup, 1999).

Applicants should be asked to certify the completeness and accuracy of information provided on an application. This certification should also warn applicants that misstatements or omissions on the application could result in a refusal to hire someone or in discharge if they are discovered after hiring. Authorization by the applicant for certain background checks such as records pertaining to criminal convictions should also be included. Without a signed authorization, an employer faces the potential for a claim of invasion of privacy by the applicant (Grant & Kemme, 1993). Consult EEOC, state guidelines, and local school board guidelines when developing or revising any employment application.

Once the application is completed by a potential employee, the employer should review the application for appearance and completeness. The following are areas to consider (Arthur, 1986).

- \$ Appearance of the application can provide an indication to the pride an individual takes in themselves. An application with several omissions of information may mean the employee is not willing to give complete information, is not willing to accept directions, or cannot read. It may also be an indication of the applicant's honesty.
- \$ Review the applicant's work history and make a note of any gaps between jobs or overlaps in jobs. These are areas to follow up on during an interview. You should determine why these gaps occurred.
- \$ Inconsistencies should be noted and followed up on during an interview.
- \$ Consider the frequency of job changes and reasons for changing jobs. Follow up during an interview to determine why this occurred. The answer to these questions may be very insightful into the person's ability to follow directions, accept constructive feedback, get along with others, work with the public, and be a team player.
- \$ Review the application for any "red flags." This is any information that does not seem to make sense.

### **Background Checks**

School foodservice directors have a responsibility to protect their customers. Putting the

“wrong person” in a school foodservice position can open the door to work-related crime and violence. Comprehensive background checks provide critical information for making the best hiring decisions. Prior to conducting any background checks, the local school board policy and procedure for conducting background checks should be investigated and followed.

A successful background check begins with the collection of vital information on the employment application. To conduct a thorough background check, the potential employer will need to collect the applicant’s full name, date of birth, Social Security Number (SSN), other names used, dates and places of prior employment, and educational history. Although the educational history may not be pertinent to performing a job, it may be necessary to conduct a thorough background check. To conduct criminal background checks, a criminal history is necessary. The suggested steps for a criminal search include the SSN verification, a court records search, and a data analysis (Long, 2001).

Reference checks are a good tool to use to assess work behavior and attitude. A previous employer may have insight into a prospective employee’s dependability, honesty, initiative, and mood on the job. However, because of the increasing number of litigations many former employers are apprehensive about giving detailed information about previous employees. If a potential employee has no work experience, references may be obtained from ministers, principals of schools where his or her children attend, or leaders of volunteer organizations. Checking the driving record of a person being considered as a driver is critical and can be obtained from the state department of transportation.

As a general rule, background checks are conducted in the final stages of employee selection. General background checks and criminal background checks can be conducted in-house or by an outside firm. A variety of companies offering these services can be found on the Internet or in a local telephone book. Prices vary according to the level of background check desired.

### Tests

The key goal for screening job candidates is to predict the applicant’s job performance before hiring. Many tests are available to assist directors with this task.

- \$ Aptitude tests predict the ability to learn and perform job tasks.
- \$ Practical tests measure what an individual knows and can do in a job – for example, accuracy and speed of using computer cash register terminals.
- \$ Literacy tests measure reading and math skills.
- \$ Personality tests evaluate mental, emotional, and temperamental makeup.
- \$ Honesty and integrity tests evaluate the likelihood of stealing and trustworthiness of applicants.
- \$ Physical ability tests measure strength, flexibility, stamina, and speed for jobs that require physical performance.
- \$ Medical tests determine physical fitness for the job.
- \$ Drug tests show the presence of illegal drugs that could impair job performance and threaten safety of others.

Medical tests and physical exams are prohibited at the pre-offer stage. However, once a job offer is made, it may be conditional upon the results of a medical exam as long as all entering employees in the same job category are subjected to the same examination regardless of disability (ADA Guidelines, 2002).

Tests should contain four qualities: job-relatedness, nondiscriminatory usage, validity (produce accurate results), and reliability (produce dependable results). Validity and reliability information about the test instrument can be obtained from the developing or sponsoring company of the test. However, the burden of proof is on the employer to establish the relationship between test results and performance on a particular job. The employer must be able to prove that by scoring in a specific range on a test an employee will be successful or unsuccessful on the job. This often requires using a test for a period of time as a pilot to gather information about this relationship before adopting the test as a permanent part of the hiring process.

### **Interviews**

One of the most accurate predictors of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Behavioral interviewing is 55% predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10% predictive (Hansen, 2002). In traditional interviewing, the interviewee can tell the interviewer what they expect to hear, even if the interviewee is manipulating the truth. Even with situational questions that start with “How would you handle XYZ situation?” the interviewer is unable to determine if the interviewee would actually react in a given situation in the way described. In a behavioral interview it is much more difficult to give responses that are untrue with respect to an individual’s character. During a behavioral interview, the interviewer asks the interviewee to tell a behavioral story and probes for details such as “What were you thinking at this point?” or “Tell me more about your meeting with this person,” or “Lead me through your decision process.” The interviewer probes for details to reveal specific behaviors. A sample list of questions according to skills identified as important for foodservice assistants is found in the Appendix.

Depending upon the goals and objectives of the school foodservice program, certain skills may be more important than others. Each job may have a unique set of skills. The interview should be based on the five to eight skills that are identified as most important. These skills should be assessed during the interview process. Questions can then be selected according to the five to eight skills selected as most important for a given school foodservice operation. Each potential candidate for a specific job should be asked the same questions and evaluated on the same criteria using individual score sheets. Common evaluation criteria includes completeness, behaviors exhibited, and ease of answering. One recommended method to ensure all potential employees are evaluated fairly is to create a scoring sheet for the interview questions. An example with evaluation criteria is shown in Exhibit I.

Once all interviews are completed, total scores should be compared to determine potential employees with the highest score. If the interviewer does not believe that scores are high enough to hire any of the applicants, further recruitment should be conducted. Additional information on interviewing can be found in the NFSMI *Building Human Resource Management Skills*:

*Achieving an Effective Food Service System, Unit 2.3 Finding the Best.* (Note that interview questions in this video follow a traditional interview pattern and not a behavioral style.)

## Exhibit I

### Example Interview Score Sheet

Name: John Doe

Question	Excellent* (4)	Good** (3)	Fair*** (2)	Poor**** (1)	Total
<b>Skill: Able to follow directions</b> Question: Tell me about a time in a previous job or experience when you were tempted not to follow directions but decided to follow directions.	X				4
<b>Skill: Relates well to the child as a customer</b> Question: In a school foodservice operation you have many customers, tell me how you have worked with children as customers.		X			3
<b>Skill: Team player</b> Questions: On any job in your past, tell me about a situation when the whole staff had to work together to get a task completed.				X	1
<b>Skill: Shows commitment to the job</b> Question: Tell me about a time when you put work ahead of other commitments in your life.	X				4
<b>Skill: Honest</b> Question: Tell me about a time when you were aware someone was taking items from the work place.			X		2
<b>Total</b>					<b>14</b>

\*Excellent score was given when interviewees answered questions without apprehension, could readily give examples, and explain the situation. They were enthusiastic about providing the answers.

\*\*Good score was given when interviewees answered questions with no apprehension, could give examples, but paused to think about a situation. However, they could explain the situation. They were pleasant when giving answers, but did not exhibit enthusiasm.

\*\*\*Fair score was given when interviewees had difficulty answering questions but did not describe all details about a situation. They were uneasy during the question and may have exhibited minor distracting behaviors such as lightly tapping a foot or looking at the ceiling.

\*\*\*\*Poor score was given when interviewees could not describe a situation or provide details. They were uneasy during the interview or a specific question and may have exhibited major distracting behaviors such as tapping a foot, twisting hair, or staring at the ceiling.

### **Tips for Conducting Interviews**

- The interviewer is responsible for creating a calm and respectful atmosphere.
- The goals of an interview are to assess the applicant, describe the job and working conditions, and create goodwill for your organization.
- The interviewer should always be prepared for an interview. Review the questions to be asked and application form before an interview.
- Allow enough time for the interview.
- Begin the interview by introducing yourself and making the applicant comfortable. Tell the applicant about the mission and vision of the organization.
- If you plan to make notes during the interview, tell the applicant you will be making notes for yourself so that you can recall specifics later to ensure the best decision is made.
- Use active listening. Listen to the answers and observe body language as the applicant answers the questions.
- Let the applicant do most of the talking. Your role as an interviewer is to ask questions and probe for information.
- Use the end of the interview to tell the applicant about the job and ask if they have any questions.
- Give the applicant an expected time frame for a decision and stick to that time frame.

### **Conclusion**

Employee applications, background checks, tests, and interviews can all be used to assess potential employees. If information about an individual from at least two sources indicates the same things, then the probability that the potential employee is either a good fit or a poor fit is increased. Using at least two of the four separate tools to screen potential employees and assessing the potential employee's history can help ensure that the foodservice director has hired the best person for the job.

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### Available Web Pages for More Information

#### Tests:

[www.gneil.com](http://www.gneil.com)  
[www.psychcorp.com](http://www.psychcorp.com)  
[www.workskillsfirst.com](http://www.workskillsfirst.com)  
[www.psonline.com](http://www.psonline.com)  
[www.ncspearson.com](http://www.ncspearson.com)  
[www.plus32.com](http://www.plus32.com)  
[www.jobspectrum.com](http://www.jobspectrum.com)

#### Behavioral Interviewing:

[www.quintcareers.com](http://www.quintcareers.com)  
[www.missouri.edu/~cppcwww/behavioralinterviewing.shtml](http://www.missouri.edu/~cppcwww/behavioralinterviewing.shtml)  
[www.interviewedge.com](http://www.interviewedge.com)  
[www.employeetrainer.com/management/behavior.html](http://www.employeetrainer.com/management/behavior.html)

#### Background Checks:

[www.easybackground.com](http://www.easybackground.com)  
[www.checkmeout.com](http://www.checkmeout.com)  
[www.absolutebackground.com](http://www.absolutebackground.com)  
[www.infolinkscreening.com](http://www.infolinkscreening.com)

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**APPENDIX**

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## Sample Interview Questions According to Skill

### Communication Skills

#### **Able to follow directions**

Question: Tell me about a time in a previous job or experience when you were tempted not to follow directions but decided to follow directions.

Probe: What was the result? Did this involve other people and how were they affected?

Question: At your last job, how did you use standardized recipes and production records? Tell me about a time when you took a shortcut and what happened.

Probe: How did this affect the meal production for that meal? How did it impact other employees or customers?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me about a time you took a shortcut in preparing a recipe and what happened.

Probe: How did this affect the meal preparation for that meal? How did it impact others who were involved with the meal preparation or those eating the meal?

#### **Able to accept constructive feedback**

Question: Tell me about a time when your supervisor gave you feedback about a situation.

Probe: What actions did you take as a result?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me about a time when your spouse/significant other/close friend gave you feedback about a situation.

Probe: What actions did you take as a result?

#### **Give clear directions**

Question: Tell me about a time when you had to give someone specific instructions on completing a task.

Probe: How did you evaluate whether they understood your directions?

Question: On your last job, you taught someone to\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank with a pertinent skill. The skill could be mop the floor, operate the computer terminal, bake a cake, etc.)

Probe: How did you determine if the person was able to follow the directions?

## **Interpersonal Skills**

### **Likes children**

Question: Tell me about a time when you observed a disruptive or crying child in a group setting or in public.

Probe: What did you do to calm the child? What did you think about the child's behavior?

### **Relates well to the child as a customer**

Question: In a school foodservice operation you have many customers. Tell me how you have worked with children as customers.

Probe: Give me an example of how you showed children respect. How did the children react to you?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me how you have worked with children in either a church/community/social environment.

Probe: Give me an example of how you showed children respect. Tell me how children react to you.

### **Gets along with others**

Question: Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with another individual at work and how you resolved the situation.

Probe: Tell me about your relationship with the individual after the resolution.

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with another individual in a church/community/social setting and how you resolved the situation.

Probe: Tell me about your relationship with the individual after the resolution.

Question: Describe to me how you related to the people on your last job. Feel free to use examples.

Probe: How would you describe the relationship among workers?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Describe to me how you relate to the people in your church/social organization/community group. Feel free to use examples.

Probe: How would you describe the relationship you have with these individuals?

### **Has respect for others**

Question: Tell me about a time you did something out of respect for an individual.

### **Enjoys working with the public**

Question: Describe a day (either work-related or volunteer-related) when a major part of the day was spent working with the public.

Probe: What was the most enjoyable and the most unpleasant part of that day?

### **Does not gossip about others on the job**

Question: Tell me about a job in your past that had rules about gossiping on the job.

Probe: How did you react to these rules? Tell me about a time when these rules were not followed. What were the consequences?

Question: Tell me about a time when a rumor was spread through gossip about yourself or one of your fellow workers or friends.

Probe: How was the rumor stopped? If it was in a work setting, how did the supervisor deal with issue of gossip? If it was in a social or community setting, how was the situation handled?

## **Work Ethic**

### **Dependable**

Question: From your past, tell me about a time a person told you they would do something and did not do it.

Probe: What made this incident stand out in your mind? Did you let the other person know what you thought? If so, what happened?

### **Honesty**

Question: Tell me about a time when you were aware someone was taking items from the workplace.

Probe: Did anyone ever say anything to him or her? Was this a common practice at that work setting? What about this incident makes it stand out in your mind?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me about a time when you were aware someone was taking items they should not have been taking.

Probe: Did anyone ever say anything to him or her? What about this incident makes it stand out in your mind?

### **Team player**

Question: On any job in your past, tell me about a situation when the whole staff had to work together to get a task completed.

Probe: How did the staff act when the task was completed? What other tasks did this momentum carry over into?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: In any of your volunteer/church/social activities in the past, tell me about a situation when the whole group had to work together to get a task completed.

Probe: How did the group act when the task was completed? What other tasks did this momentum carry over into?

### **Willingness to learn**

Question: From past experience, describe a time when you were assigned by your employer to attend a training class.

Probe: What type of training was it? How valuable was that training to you for doing your job better? What did you think after being told you were going to attend a specific training?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: From your past experience, describe a time when you were told by a social group leader, church leader, or PTA/PTO leader that you were designated by the group to attend a specific training class.

Probe: What type of training was it? How valuable was that training to you? What did you think after being told you were identified to attend a specific training?

### **Willingness to accept directions**

Question: Tell me about a time you were told to do a task a specific way although you thought it should be done another way.

Probe: How did you handle the situation?

### **Takes responsibility for your own actions**

Question: Tell me about a situation from your past when you did something that you knew was against the rule/policy, but did it anyway.

Probe: What was the result of this action? Walk me through your thought process that led you to the actions you took.

### **Accepts change**

Question: Describe a time when a new procedure was introduced to your job and you had to change the way you were doing something.

Probe: Describe how the change affected how you did your job. What was your attitude and mood during this change? How was your mood and attitude altered after the change was implemented?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Describe a time when you had to change an ingrained health, work, or personal habit such as smoking, eating high-fat foods, excessive eating, or not exercising. What steps did you take to make this change?

Probe: Describe how the change affected how you did specific tasks. What was your attitude during this change?

### **Shows commitment to the job**

Question: Tell me about a time when you put work ahead of other commitments in your life.

Probe: What were the consequences of this choice? How did you make it a win-win situation?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me about a time when you put a commitment you made to someone to do something ahead of other commitments in your life.

Probe: What were the consequences of this choice? How did you make it a win-win situation?

### **Flexible**

Question: Give me an example of a time in your past when you had to do something that you really did not want to do.

Probe: How was the situation resolved? What did you think while you were doing it?

### **Takes initiative to accomplish a task**

Question: Describe a time when you took the initiative to accomplish a task although it was not necessarily your responsibility to do that task.

Probe: Whose job do you think it was to do that task? How did doing the other task impact the tasks you had to do? Were there any other effects?

## **Attitude**

### **Hardworking**

Question: Describe to me the steps you have taken in your life to accomplish a desired goal.

Probe: What was the goal? How and when in your life did you develop this goal? Describe to me what motivated you to take the first step. How long did it take you to accomplish this goal?

### **Self-motivated**

Question: In your last job what motivated you to do the best job you could?

Probe: Was it external forces such as money or benefits, or was it self-satisfaction and doing the job because you liked the job?

Question: Describe to me a task you would do at your last job that was not part of your job description but you did because you wanted to do it.

Probe: How did your supervisor react to your performing this task?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Describe to me a time in your life when you did something to enhance yourself because you wanted to do it.

Probe: How did your family react to your doing this?

### **Willing to go beyond the requirements of the job when needed**

Question: Tell me about a time you stayed after work or did work on the weekend to help out a friend or fellow worker.

Probe: What did you think when they asked you to help? What did you have to give up to help?

Alternate question for no foodservice work background: Tell me about a time you went the “extra mile” to help a friend when they asked for your help.

Probe: What did you think when they asked you to help? What did you have to give up to help?

### **Cheerful**

Question: Tell me about a time when a coworker or friend noticed a change in your mood.

Probe: What was your mood? What was it that your friend or coworker noticed? What did they do?