PEARLS OF WISDOM

Finding the right person – being in charge of the recruitment process

Madonna Nicoll has been directing her own support for two years. She works with a Host Provider but has full responsibility for recruiting, engaging and training her own staff. She offers this reflection on her experience for others who may be thinking about taking on this responsibility.

How did you know where to start with your recruitment?

In the past I was involved with a service who gave me the opportunity to be involved in the recruitment of staff. They placed the advertisement in the paper, filtered the applicants and would then tell me who they thought would suit me. I would choose who to interview from the available options and then organise and conduct the interviews myself. The Coordinator of that service supported the interview process until I gained experience and confidence in my own abilities.

Advertising

When I started Self-directing I sought advice on how to write advertisements. I continue to use one format from that time but have modified it to suit my own purposes. I find it's important to personalise the advertisement to reflect who I am and what workers can expect of this particular work environment. For example, my place is a pet friendly environment. I have found that adding important personal details like that helps people to be aware from the beginning that the work environment is a home and that they need to respect it as *my* home first and foremost.

The initial advice I was given included information about different avenues for advertising. I have tried several places. Currently I use the Gumtree website and QUT Guild, as I am a student. I have had most success using Gumtree. One thing I learned quickly was not to include my phone number as I used to get phone calls at inconvenient and intrusive times. Specifying appropriate and preferable times for phone calls may be another option. . I have found advertising online is quick and easy especially when you become more experienced with how the websites work. Once I have a number of interviews lined up I take the advertisement down from the website straight away. Gumtree now allows you to pause the ad and then to start it again instantly if the process is unsuccessful.

Contacting Applicants

I tend to do everything by email. First I contact applicants if I need to clarify any information. I then try to respond to everybody who applies letting them know respectfully if they haven't been shortlisted.

I try to give an interview to any applicants who appear to meet the criteria I am looking for, even if this means conducting a number of interviews. Experience has shown me that situations can change rapidly and job seekers may receive another offer or be no longer available due to circumstances outside their control. For this reason I ask any applicants I am interested in if I can keep their details on file. If I have a list of people who I would like to work with me I can avoid starting the whole recruitment process all over again.

Recently I organised six interviews in the one day and still had people applying, some of whom could have been offered an interview. On that occasion I gave those people information about other possible places to apply for work. I often do this as I know how important it is to get good applicants.

Interviews - organisation

I do all my interviews face to face, rather than by phone. I did a phone interview once but I found it harder to judge how I would interact with the person without having the information that body language and facial expressions can provide.

I prefer to interview everyone on the same day. This way I can compare the perspectives that all applicants have about the job while the interviews are still fresh in my mind. I allow around 45 minutes per interview with 30 minutes for the actual conversation and then a little time for reflection and notes.
I like the interview to be organic and natural, a more informal style where the conversation moves in its own direction. This helps the person I am interviewing to be more comfortable and at ease and helps with getting to know them. I have tried a more formal approach but I was not comfortable with that and I didn't gather as much information from people using that technique.

Interviews – what I look for

I use this time to learn about the person so I can get a sense of whether we will work well together. I also share as much about myself as I am comfortable with during the interview so that the person can get a sense for themselves of how we would work together.

I begin the interview by asking open questions to get a sense of who people are from their interests and past experiences. I try to learn about their values and why they are interested in working in my personal space under my direction. I like to see whether the person views the role as one of care or support. While they need to show responsiveness in the role it is not about parenting; it is about supporting me with my needs, not offering support that they believe is appropriate.

I respond to people who are open with me during the interview. If a worker is mechanical in their approach it doesn't work for them to be a part of my life. I look for people I enjoy talking with and who I can relate to. I like to work with people who see me as a person rather than with people who treat me with indifference. It is extremely upsetting and hurtful to have someone in your home who does not see you as a person or who sees you as someone whose opinions do not matter.

I also look for nonverbal responses to information I give during an interview. This can provide a lot of information about applicants. During the interview I also explain what is expected of them in the role. For example, I once had a worker who was a vegetarian and didn't like handling meat - dinners were a complicated process for both of us! I also encourage applicants to ask questions so I can ensure there are no surprises later on.

I tend to hire students from the fields of health care, social work, community services or teaching. I've also often hired people seeking a career change. I am interested in anyone who shows a real interest in ensuring I have the life I desire.

Experience is not always an advantage. Often people with the least experience are better workers. People with a history of working in support roles can forget that each person is different and can tend to believe that all people with the same or similar disability have the same needs or are assisted the same way. Of course, however, some people with a lot of experience come with an open mind, they listen and can offer new insights as well. The key is being able to see that in the interview.

Training

During the interview I advise all applicants of the training involved. I organise four buddy training sifts with existing workers. These include two observation shifts and two hands on shifts where the experienced worker assists me with the training. . At the completion of training I ask the new people how they are feeling and whether they consider they require any further training. All new workers also attend manual handling training sessions as soon as possible.

Paperwork

I keep documents on file to help streamline the process of recruitment. I have a template for advertisements, an application form and a draft interview schedule. As I confirm each interview I prepare an interview line up which I print out the night before. I include resumes and any other information I might need during the interview. The line-up document prevents double booking and makes planning the interviews easier.

Managing Staff

I believe that managing staff is all about connections; you have to be able to connect with the people who work with you.

I am flexible with my workers, as I believe working together is a two way street. As an employer I feel I need to be flexible with my workers if I expect them to reciprocate. That doesn't mean I allow free rein with the work but that we work together to support my life.

Because I develop such a good relationship with my workers we celebrate milestones together which may include birthday cards, gifts and invitations to celebrations. I have been to a number of big events throughout the years and can brag that I am godmother to the daughter of one of my past workers. Over time the support relationship may evolve into friendship and often it is these friendships that have safeguarded my life during very difficult times. I like the relationship to be warm, comfortable and respectful.

Letting go

There are the very occasional times when choosing a worker doesn't work out. With time and experience it gets easier to see possible problems and to find ways of dealing with issues before it's too late.

I had to terminate a few workers when I was with the traditional service and employed staff. . However, since I have been self-directing for the past two years, I've only had to let one worker go. This person was with me for about 6 months, and was a bit unreliable. We discussed the problem I had with her unreliability. She understood how I felt and agreed to put in a bigger effort to fulfil her employment obligations. When situations like this arise, I don't see any point in getting angry. I believe it's best to discuss the problem first and try to resolve it. In the end I acknowledged that this particular person and I hadn't really connected and that she had a number of other commitments that hindered her commitment to me. When the problem continued I explained that the situation wasn't working and gave her two weeks' notice. She agreed and the situation was resolved amicably.

Safeguarding

I believe that checking referees is an important safeguard when employing people to work with you. After the interviews I call all relevant referees. I record the calls with a voice recorder so I can review their responses later and write their feedback on the referee checklist. I inform them at the start that I am recording their responses and that I will be the only person with access and that the recording will be deleted after transcription. If they are busy, or if they prefer, I offer to send them the questions by email and collect their feedback that way. I use the referee questions that the host provider made available in their hosting booklet when I started with them. I am thinking of requesting referee email addresses so I can complete this process more quickly and then follow with a phone call to the referee if needed. I also accept written reference letters as a referee check if these are provided at the start.

PEARLS OF WISDOM

Do you find recruiting staff difficult?

I like being in control of the recruitment process and having an insight into who is applying. I found this works better than the generic recruitment that my previous service conducted. That process didn't really work for me. I like having ownership of the applicant selection and appointment.

Recruitment wasn't terrifying but the step to Self-Direction was. I was terrified about having sufficient trained workers for vacant shifts and thought that with a service I would have greater access to constant staff. However I have found that I have had less instability and insecurity since I have been self-directing. Self-direction is the best thing I've ever done.