



HIRING PROCESSES IN 9-1-1

WHAT DOES YOUR AGENCY DO?

Agencies use a variety of assessments, interviewing methods and orientation techniques in their quest for the right personnel.

By Matt Berg

Dispatch is like many other jobs. Each center does many things similarly and other things differently. Some dispatch fire only or law enforcement only; some take 9-1-1 calls and dispatch a specific discipline; others dispatch multiple disciplines. Some have supervisors in charge; others rely on managers or directors, while some use lead dispatchers. Still others use a sergeant, lieutenant, captain, battalion chief, district chief, fire chief, etc. Some work as true civilians; others as civilians but under the umbrella of a sworn agency. Communities also hire differently, depending on where we live and work.

I sat down with a few 9-1-1 professionals and asked about their processes for screening individuals who want to join the ranks of the best profession on the planet. I received

mostly similar answers but also found a few surprises here and there.

Everyone started with an application process. Applications can be taken on paper or

electronically, and with COVID becoming the “new normal,” many more are moving to an all-electronic hiring process starting with their application. During the application, cities/counties/agencies generally remove applicants who are under 18, have a felony or sometimes certain misdemeanors on their record, and possibly even a record of speeding tickets or bad credit. Some places will only hire U.S. citizens, while some have stipulations that an applicant must have been in the U.S. for over 10 years if not a citizen. One agency requested the name of supervisors the applicant had worked with in part-time jobs, regardless of how many decades had past.

Agencies varied, but many moved to some form of testing after the ap. Basic testing

products measured typing speed, attention to detail, data entry, listening skills and even multitasking. Other agencies perform personality testing to see if the applicant's personality is a good match for the profession. Some agencies run a criminal history prior to testing, while others may wait or not run one at all. Before the pandemic, many tests were done in person, but they are increasingly done virtually – sometimes even at home. Scoring these tests can vary from a set standard (X number of words or keystrokes per minute) to a “high fit” or “low fit” score. Deciding where to make a cut off for each test is vitally important to ensuring the pool of candidates isn't too large or small. “Testing” your products by having your own personnel take the tests is a best practice and should be done every few years to ensure candidates possess the required skillsets.

Some agencies conducted a sit-along in which applicants get to see what dispatch does and how it works. Some agencies do an orientation that is like a sit-along, but instead of sitting with a public safety telecommunicator, a presentation introduces fledgling new hires to life on our side of the headset. This is a time to explain what we do, play a few calls or snippets of radio traffic, answer questions, and have star employees tell the potential public safety telecommunicators some life stories. One agency used this as an additional testing procedure to see who was paying attention, who asked good questions and whether the candidate seemed to understand the importance of the job. This was also a good time to make sure they had been paying attention through the hiring process. Candidates asking questions about having to work nights/holidays/weekends would be an indication that the candidate was not paying attention.

Generally, after this stage, many agencies conduct an interview. Some agencies interview as many as possible, some interview a set number based on vacancies, and others attempt to interview as few as possible. Interviews may be conducted by a hiring manager and/or someone from human resources. Sometimes supervisory staff handle the interviews – managers/directors or even telecommunicators. Interviews usually have a set of predetermined questions so that everyone is receiving the same information, and interviewers are looking for the same sorts of answers from each person. Most have a panel or group that conduct interviews.

The final hiring and screening stages can include a background check, polygraph, psychiatric test, physicals, fingerprinting, conditional employment offer and, finally, a job offer. Melissa Cupery, an emergency communications officer for an agency in the mountain west, said that her agency used to conduct a psych eval but stopped a few years ago. Her agency found that with a pre-polygraph, drug/hearing tests, criminal history check, polygraph and the battery of other items required of potential hires, they weren't losing people to the psychiatric test. Deb Mounce, Recruiter – Emergency Communications and Citizen Services, for Virginia Beach 9-1-1 and 3-1-1, found that her agency loses many people to the polygraph, most frequently for admitted drug use.

Now that you have been introduced to the hiring process elsewhere, consider your agency does? Why does it operate this way? Is there anything your agency does well or needs to add to its screening process for new hires? Are you doing something because “that's what we have always done” or not doing something because “we have never done that before?” Check to see what your agency does and see how you can get involved. ●

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