

Hiring the Right Individual for Your Corrections Staff

By Marcia Morgan and Jack E. Smith

Warden Downey sat at his desk staring at the budget numbers. The latest financial crisis has hit the department of corrections hard and employee issues — hiring, terminating and turnover — are some of the biggest expenses. Finding an employee who is the right “fit” is needed more than ever. Additionally, federal legislation like the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) has raised awareness about zero tolerance for staff-inmate sexual relations; but how do you identify and avoid hiring staff with this propensity? Today’s economic and political climate demands that Warden Downey screen in high-performing individuals who stay with the organization while screening out potentially manipulative, dishonest, violent or predatory individuals. So, how can these difficult objectives be accomplished?

The Problem

The world of corrections work is rapidly changing. The first-line employee of the past was hired and trained to perform “a” job. He was to be physically strong and a disciplinarian. But to be effective in the prison or jail of today, employees must possess a higher degree of integrity and problem-solving skills and be able to work well in a more team-oriented environment. He or she must also perform a wider variety of duties, provide reliable service, be a good communicator, solve problems and adhere to many more rules/policies/procedures than in the past. Finally, the correctional officer of today must be prepared to continually develop and update his or her skills.

Correctional administrators must also provide needed services while keeping their costs at a minimum. Poor performance, absenteeism,

federal rules and regulations, and lawsuits eat into ever-tightening correctional budgets. As such, a critical component of any correctional organization is to select and retain employees who can help the organization reach its service and cost-control goals.

The Solution

Historically, most COs were hired using unstructured interviews and/or civil service exams, but fortunately for Warden Downey, a wide range of reliable and valid assessment methods and tools are available to assist in the decision process. Several of those best practices are discussed below.

Assessing personality. A series of recent research studies examining the use of personality tests have shown promising results and indicate the presence of five personality dimensions or constructs that can be consistently measured. This basic research in personality strongly suggests that five factors are sufficient to capture the basic structure of human personality.¹ Called the “Big Five” personality factors, they include extroversion/introversion, emotional stability, agreeableness or likeability, conscientiousness, and intellect. More important is the evidence that these five factors are consistently correlated with job-related behavior.² This is exciting news because, while we have always known that personality was theoretically related to job performance, good sound evidence now exists that some personality characteristics can be reliably and validly assessed. Thus it appears that the use of personality tests, when properly constructed and validated, shows real promise in the work world, including corrections.

Assessing judgment. Another promising approach is the use of situational judgment tests. Tests assessing an individual’s judgment concerning work-related situations have an excellent track record of predicting job success.³ These assessment tools typically present the candidate with work-related scenarios where the individual must identify appropriate responses (e.g., best and worst choices) from a list of possible alternatives. This approach appears to have considerable potential as a tool for corrections because COs are faced with a myriad of challenging situations requiring the application of sound analysis and judgment.

Realistic job previews. Attracting potential employees to the organization is a primary goal of recruiting. But attempts by the organization to oversell itself as a great place to work may give applicants inflated expectations about the nature and rewards of employment. Numerous studies dealing with employee satisfaction and voluntary turnover have shown that “unmet expectations” is a critical factor in determining early exits from the organization. Recent theory and research suggest that employers might be better off avoiding “sugar coating” the message to applicants and providing realistic job previews (RJPs) instead.⁴

RJPs are used to inform candidates of various aspects of the job and work climate that may be undesirable or problematic. Research shows that by communicating accurately with applicants regarding the job and the organization, those who accept employment will generally be more satisfied and therefore less likely to leave the organization voluntarily. Opportunities to provide RJP information may include a number of formats including

the interview process, brochures, assessment instruments, videotapes and realistic information on Web sites.

Predicting employee turnover. A landmark article written by Barrick and Zimmerman (2005)⁵ identified a number of assessment variables that can be used for predicting employee turnover, including biodata, attitudes, behavioral intentions and dispositions.

Those variables have a reasonable track record for identifying candidates with a propensity for leaving the organization. Generally speaking, these items are placed into a retention scale in an assessment inventory and scored according to pre-determined keys. The predictive validity of these tools can be substantially improved over time when the scoring keys for a particular organization are recalibrated based on the collection and analysis of actual turnover data for an organization.

Structured behavioral interviewing. While Warden Downey, no doubt, uses employment interviews as an integral part of his hiring process, the critical question becomes is he conducting those interviews in the most effective manner. A wide range of research studies clearly show that the interview process can be greatly improved if certain criteria are met.⁶

- Questions are based on job analysis (i.e., they are job related).
- Both the interview content and process are structured (i.e., everyone has the same opportunity to perform).
- Questions focus on the past behavior of the candidate (i.e., behavioral description questions asking what they have done) and/or pose hypothetical situations (i.e., situational judgment questions that ask what they would do).

There are a number of other factors that can and do contribute to the viability of the employment interview, but these three factors are a must for ensuring that the interview is both reliable and valid.

Figure 1. CSI Factors and Descriptions

Factor	Description
Dependability	Being reliable, responsible, dependable and fulfilling obligations.
Respect for Authority	Willingness to accept and comply with directives from individuals in positions of power and authority.
Self Control / Stress Tolerance	Maintaining composure, keeping emotions in check, controlling anger and avoiding aggressive behavior, even in very difficult situations.
Cooperation / Teamwork	Being pleasant with others on the job and displaying a good-natured, cooperative attitude.
Communication Skills	Listening to what other people are saying and asking questions as appropriate (active listening); talking to others to effectively convey information (speaking).
Work Ethic	Applying a constant and earnest effort when completing tasks including being a self-starter, responsible, determined and productive.
Principled Behavior	Avoiding counterproductive behavior such as using illicit drugs, cheating, fighting, etc.
Attention to Detail	Being careful about detail and thorough in completing work tasks; being aware of one's surroundings; avoiding complacency.
Self-esteem	Belief in one's capability and having a positive self-image; having high self-esteem and belief in controlling one's own destiny.
Life Stability	Having a secure and enduring support system in his/her personal life; being financially secure and stable.
Judgment	Scrutinizing work-related situations and making objective and judicious decisions based on the information available.

An Example

One promising approach for improving the selection process is the Corrections Selection Inventory (CSI). This new selection tool systematically incorporates each of the concepts discussed above. This instrument was developed specifically to help correctional organizations select individuals who are most likely to "fit" the new and competitive corrections environment. In particular, the CSI measures 11 critical factors or dimensions determined as important to job performance in the corrections environment (see Figure 1).

Each of these critical success factors was determined through a careful job analysis process. Research for the CSI began with a thorough analysis of the CO job. Starting with the Department of Labor's job description for corrections officer, factors

were reviewed and refined using subject matter experts from the field, and finally evaluated in terms of their importance for job success.

CSI consists of five basic components consistent with the principles of good selection discussed above: 1) a personality component, 2) a situational judgment component, 3) a turnover scale, 4) a realistic job preview component and 5) a structured behavioral interviewing component. With the exception of the turnover scale, all components of the assessment tool were systematically developed and validated using both public and private corrections personnel. In addition, every effort was made to adhere to both government and professional guidelines related to the development and validation of such instruments. Following is a brief description of each component.

Figure 2. Personality Component

Factor	Example Items
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am never late for work. People can count on me to fulfill my commitments.
Respect for Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I often consult with persons in authority for their advice. I respect the opinions of my superiors.
Cooperation/Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Almost everyone likes me. I get along with everybody.

Personality component. This section of the assessment includes 188 self-report personality items measuring 10 factors or scales such as dependability, respect for authority, cooperation/teamwork, etc. Figure 2 provides examples of those items.

In addition to the job analysis, evidence for the reliability and validity of the personality component was established through the use of a number of psychometric techniques including establishing the internal consistency, stability, construct validity and criterion-related validity of each factor.

Job preview matrix. This component of the CSI provides the candidate with a realistic preview of the job and allows hiring personnel to assess a candidate's willingness to engage in certain types of expected behaviors on the job. Figure 3 provides an example of such information from the CSI feedback report. In this example, hiring personnel would focus their interview discussions where a candidate has expressed "reluctance" or "refusal" to engage in certain behaviors.

Structured behavioral interview. As previously discussed, interviews are most effective when they are structured, based on job analysis and use behaviorally oriented questions.

The CSI provides interviewers with a set of behaviorally-oriented questions for each of the key factors or scales. An example of a work ethic interview question might be: Please describe the last time you were complimented regarding the completion of a task or assignment or on your work ethic. Organizations have the flexibility of modifying those questions and can establish their own administrative rules or procedures (e.g., focus interview questions on those areas where the candidate scores poorly on the CSI assessment, ask the same two questions for all 10 critical factors).

Figure 3. Realistic Job Preview Examples

Job Preview Matrix					
Review the job requirements and follow-up with questions for those requirements where a candidate has expressed "reluctance" or "refusal."	REFUSAL	RELUCTANT	WILLING		
	I WILL NOT:	RATHER NOT:	NOT 1ST CHOICE:	DOESN'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE:	I PREFER TO:
When it comes to working evenings or nights (2nd or 3rd shift):			X		
When it comes to working weekends:	X				
When it comes to working holidays:		X			
When it comes to working on an "on call" basis (be available to work as needed):					X
When it comes to working around people with contagious diseases:				X	
When it comes to working around dangerous and violent people:				X	
When it comes to working in a paramilitary setting (do as you're told):					X
When it comes to working extended shifts:				X	
When it comes to being "pulled away" from your assigned area or department to another area in need:		X			

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Figure 4. Retention Scale Examples

Indicator	Example
Biodata	How many friends do you have working at this organization? <input type="radio"/> None <input type="radio"/> One <input type="radio"/> Two or three <input type="radio"/> Four or five <input type="radio"/> More than five
Attitude and Behavioral Intentions	I feel very committed to working for this organization. <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Neither Agree Nor Disagree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
Dispositions	I am convinced that I will succeed at whatever I do. <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Neither Agree Nor Disagree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
Satisfaction With Present (Past) Employment	How would you describe your present job (last job if not presently employed)? <input type="radio"/> I enjoy my job almost all of the time. <input type="radio"/> I enjoy my job most of the time. <input type="radio"/> I enjoy my job some of the time. <input type="radio"/> I seldom enjoy my job. <input type="radio"/> I have no previous work experience.

Turnover component. In addition, the CSI was designed to measure the probability that a candidate will stay with the organization. CSI's "Retention Index" provides a measure of the likelihood that employee applicants will be committed to the organization and choose to remain with the organization.

Summary

A wide range of effective methods and tools exist for selecting individuals for employment in the corrections industry. Whether Warden Downey

uses the CSI or another professionally developed instrument, it is critically important that such tools be used when making selection decisions. They are cost-effective and follow sound correctional practices. The use of reliable and valid assessment tools will have a very real payoff for the organization, not only for the short run, but for the long term also.

ENDNOTES

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⁵ Barrick, M.R. and R.D. Zimmerman. 2005. Reducing voluntary, avoidable turnover through selection. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(1):159-166.

⁶ Campion, M.A., D.K. Palmer and J.E. Campion. 1997. A review of structure in the selection interview. *Personnel Psychology*, 50(3):655-702.; McDaniel, M.A., D.L. Whetzel, F.L. Schmidt and S.D. Maurer. 1994. The validity of employment interviews: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 79(4):599-616.; Pulakos, E.D. and N. Schmitt. 1995. Experience-based and situational interview questions: Studies of validity. *Personnel Psychology*, 48(2):289-308.; and Campion, M.A., J.E. Campion and J.P. Hudson. 1994. Structured interviewing: A note on incremental validity and alternative question types. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 79(2):998-1002.

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