

Ascension Parish Gets A Handle on Hiring

When Ascension Parish had difficulty hiring the right people for their communications center, they turned to Select Advantage for help.



Photo courtesy of Select Advantage.

Ascension Parish located in Gonzales, LA centralized their 9-1-1 communications center in 1998 and eventually established a facility with approximately 1,600 square feet and seven fully functional dispatch consoles. There are 24 full-time and two part-time employees who dispatch police, fire and medical incidents for the entire parish, including three municipalities and three fire districts. They also provide EMD pre-arrival instructions.

In 2006, 249,196 phone calls were answered in the center (about 21,000 per month) and 67,234 calls were dispatched for service—approximately 5,600 per month. In 2007, 233,108 phone calls were answered in the center (about 19,500 per month) and 71,280 calls were dispatched for service—approximately 6,000 per month.

Pre-Employment Assessment Needed

In 2005, Lt. Cody Melancon, Communications Supervisor for Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office, realized that they were having difficulty hiring the right people for the job. Their applicants were hired as dispatchers but were not making it through the training program. "They would fill out an application, do a

Step One survey, a LECR (law enforcement candidate record) exam, TAB test and interview," says Lt. Melancon. "We finally decided that because of the special qualities needed to be an effective 9-1-1 dispatcher, the agency required a job-specific, pre-employment assessment to aid in hiring the right people for the job." During the course of several months, Ascension Parish looked at quite a few companies that offered pre-employment testing, but ultimately found that Select Advantage truly offered what they were looking for.

It was on the NENA 911 Talk Forum that Lt. Melancon first heard of Select Advantage. He was asking what other agencies were doing about pre-employment testing and Geoff Rodgers with Select Advantage e-mailed him about their services. "At the time, Ascension Parish was really struggling with hiring the right people and would hire people who would wash out. Lt. Melancon didn't understand why this was happening. He was just looking at the wrong things. Ascension Parish has good people doing the right things with good intentions; they really wanted to know that we'd give them a way to keep people around and they didn't have a way of capturing that."

Select Advantage (Vancouver, WA) is an 11-year old human resource consulting services company that develops and partners with its clients to achieve their desired goals and objectives. Their expertise covers a broad range of services from test development, pre-employment tools and services to specialized training and emergency/disaster preparedness. Select uses cutting-edge testing technology to identify the key elements needed to be successful for a dispatcher or telecommunicator. Because there is much more to the job than skills or multitasking, Select's assessment measures the components (behaviors) of the job that you can not teach or train. The work behaviors most adaptive to a communications center's success create the standard for hiring, motivating, developing, training and retaining employees. Selection and placement of dispatchers using job analysis-

Personality vs. Behavior Testing

There are many perceptions out there regarding personality and behavior based testing. While it may be very important to know what type of personality an individual can bring to an organization, it will not lead towards any consistency in performance. For example, if you take a group of top-performing people in any job—editors, doctors, lawyers, teachers or 9-1-1 dispatchers—the common denominator amongst them is not a personality. But what do they have in common? Consider your best employees; do they have the same personalities? Of course not. Think back to your school days, why do some teachers stand out in your mind over others? They were all trained and certified and met all of the minimal qualifications (and skill sets for that matter) but what a difference they had on your ability to learn. More specifically, a behaviorally-based assessment will identify the common threads which make these top performers successful. For example, one of the key elements for success in the dispatcher position is the ability to own responsibility for one's decisions and/or actions. I believe you will agree that this behavior can be found in any of the four personality styles (Choleric – Lion, Sanguine – Otter, Phlegmatic – Golden Retriever, Melancholy – Beaver). If you think about your best dispatchers, you will probably see this behavioral thread in their day-to-day decisions as well, despite what personality trait they have.

Another key difference between personality testing and behavior based testing is that personality testing is one dimensional whereas behavioral testing can be multidimensional. Every job has what seem to be contradictory behaviors. For instance, a policeman must be aggressive and yet still hold themselves in check. A personality test cannot measure both of these behaviors at the same time. A good behaviorally-based assessment will not only measure both traits but to the degree that they are required to complement each other.

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Photo courtesy of the Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office.

Teamwork plays a large part in the success of a consolidated communications center. At Ascension Parish, dispatchers are able to work together and navigate multiple agency responses effectively and efficiently.

based content and behavior, causes dramatic and positive effects on employee selection, hiring, turnover, absenteeism, safety, trainability, retention, morale and overall effectiveness. The strength behind the 9-1-1 dispatcher pre-employment assessment is the fact that it is so very job specific and measures those innate behaviors that are impossible to teach or train. This allows communications centers a unique advantage when it comes to matching applicants to likely success in the job as well as providing valuable legal protection.

After researching some initial information on Select Advantage and realizing how specific the pre-employment testing was with 9-1-1 communications centers, Lt. Melancon contacted Rodgers and wanted to know more about this unique service. Rodgers, in turn, sent them copies of the tests so they could try it out for themselves. "It was my way of saying, 'Let's make sure this is the right tool for you' and it was really easy from that standpoint for him to jump in and try it. I told them to pick two or three of their best employees and to make sure they've been through training so that they would truly know their performance and we pegged their people dead-on," said Rodgers. "That just convinced them right there that this was a piece that they were going to add to the process."

Adds Lt. Melancon, "Select Advantage provided us with sample tests which we administered to current employees. The results of these tests gave an accurate assessment of those employees' abilities. And we decided to go with their company."

As time went on, they made hiring decisions based on Select's recommendations and, in turn, they saw an incredible turnaround. New hires were staying at the job and working efficiently. In fact, when



Photo courtesy of Select Advantage.

9-1-1 Dispatcher Sample Questions



For the purposes of this test, the mission of a 911 Dispatcher is:

"Be the first link in assisting members of the community by receiving calls, gathering info and assessing customer needs. To obtain sufficient information from caller to initiate a response from the appropriate public safety agency while dealing with sensitive information in a discreet and professional manner"

Interest & Willingness Samples:

This questionnaire lists working conditions, which you must accept to become a dispatcher. Some people find dispatching is not for them because of one or more of these conditions. Successful dispatchers find these work conditions acceptable; some even enjoy these conditions.

Use the following scale to show which statement best describes you:

- A. I would enjoy this work condition and/or it clearly describes me
 B. I am willing to accept this work condition
 C. I am not willing to accept this work condition
- actively listen and retain information
A B C
 - attentive and aware of what is going on around you
A B C
 - learn from prior experiences and apply those experiences
A B C

Self-Rating Checklist Samples:

The following checklist has pairs of statements, which describe people. In some cases you may feel that both statements describe you, but we want you to choose from the two items in each pair, the one, which best describes you.

- A. able to interact with the police department
B. willing to take responsibility for your decisions
- A. willing to do things without being told
B. able to sit for long periods of time
- A. is computer literate
B. willing to learn new things
- A. willing to be part of the solution not the problem
B. able to interact with the fire department

911 Dispatcher – Sample Questions

Critical Incident Sample Questions:



This test is a select sample of situations which dispatchers must be capable of handling. Each item represents an actual situation that a dispatcher either excelled or failed in the performance of the job. These situations are intended to be gender neutral. This test exposes you to those situations, which make a significant difference in a dispatcher's job performance effectiveness. Your choice of action reveals your readiness and potential to perform as a 911 dispatcher.

- You have just received a 9-1-1 hang-up call. When you call back, you talk with a female that sounds odd but says everything is fine. While listening to her talk you hear a male voice in the background. How would you handle this situation?
 - Ask the female caller again if everything is okay
 - Ask the female caller if anyone else is present
 - Dispatch police to the scene just to make sure everything is alright
 - Ask a series of yes or no questions to obtain more information to know how to respond
 - End the call since she said everything was fine
- You have observed a new dispatcher continue to make mistakes and the situation is becoming increasingly frustrating for both you and the new dispatcher. How would you deal with the new dispatcher?
 - Encourage the new dispatcher and let her know things will get better
 - Tell the new dispatcher to ask for additional training
 - Discuss the situation with your supervisor
 - Discuss the situation with the person who trained the new dispatcher
 - Ask the new dispatcher if you can help and spend some extra time with her
- You have just received a call from a child. His Grandfather has collapsed and is non responsive. The child is on a cell phone and is unfamiliar with the area. How would you handle this situation?
 - Tell the child to go and find help
 - Ask the child questions in regards to his Grandfather's condition or status
 - Ask the child if there are any adults in the area you can talk to
 - Ask the child if there are any nearby landmarks that he can see or knows of i.e. restaurants, parks, signs, buildings, etc.
 - Ask your co-workers for assistance and advice

911 Dispatcher – Sample Questions

going through training, they were ahead of pace. "It's not magical, it's just finding the right person for the right job and you need to fill in the blanks," says Rodgers. "Now, the success rate of getting new employees through training has significantly improved because of the valuable information they now have before making a hiring commitment."

Results Were Immediate

Select Advantage should be used as early as possible in the hiring process. For many potential hires, a skills test is used including typing and multi-tasking. Rodgers agrees that skills are valuable, but emphasizes that centers should think about what is more important: the behaviors or the skills? Because the behaviors, you cannot teach—the skills you can. "By using just the skills test alone, they can find good, solid-skilled people, but that still doesn't mean that they're the right person for the job. You have attitude, you have accountability and owning responsibility for one's decisions and actions; you have a lot of other components to this job that need to be there that are typically not measured in the hiring process. Most agencies think the background check will show some of those traits but they are mistaken. "Consider this, if everyone on your staff has been through a very thorough hiring process and a lengthy training process then why is there such a range of on-the-job performance? Why are some people a better fit for the job than others? Clearly something is missing. Our assessment is helping agencies all over the world, including Ascension Parish, match the right people to what is required for success in the job," says Rodgers.

Even the implementation process is simple. After telling Select how many testing booklets are needed, the material is sent out overnight so the center is set up within a day or two. Then, they will reuse the booklets as needed. In addition, centers can receive customized answer sheets that are specific to their agency or department, and they can make copies of the answer sheet depending on how many applicants they have. Now, clients can either log onto Select's Web site and take advantage of their online scoring software and have results immediately or they may fax their completed answer sheets to Select for grading with a two-hour turn around time.

According to Lt. Melancon, Select Advantage's pre-employment testing was set up immediately and the results were evident after new hires that took the test completed the four month training program. Says Lt. Melancon, "Prior to using Select Advantage, employees were terminated for failure to successfully complete the training program. We've been using Select Advantage's service since February 2006 and it is very cost effective and affordable for our agency."

Rodgers says that after everything was up and running, Lt. Melancon told him that they felt this service was the missing piece—this was the information that they'd been looking for but couldn't find. "They loved the timeliness—we typically get results back within the hour, so they love the fact that they never have to wait on us. They can call anytime and if they have any questions about a score, we'll take time and walk them through any questions and make sure they understand what the assessment is and isn't telling them. Ultimately they love the fact that they're hiring the right people."

Stresses Lt. Melancon, "Our agency has benefited significantly by using Select Advantage in the hiring process. We strongly recommend this product to any agency that is seeking to improve their selection process when accepting applications for employment." **ENPM**

Select Advantage offers a free trial for any dispatch center who would like to try the test. For more information or your free trial, contact Geoff Rodgers at (800) 377-0554, via e-mail at geoffr



9-1-1 Dispatchers are provided with the most up-to-date equipment and information sources available to achieve success in their duties at Ascension Parish. Deputy Cheri Lee searches the CAD database for prior call information. Photo courtesy of the Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office.

@selectadv.net or visit the Web site at www.selectadv.net.

For more information on Ascension Parish, contact Lt. Melancon at (225) 621-8328 or via e-mail at cmelancon@ascensionsheriff.com.

"911 Datamaster's ALI Database products have become an invaluable asset to our PSAP. These products have allowed Lexington to consistently improve data quality and lower the cost of ownership of our ANI/ALI responsibilities while improving service to our citizens."

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Director of Enhanced 9-1-1
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