



Preparing and Supporting Museum Workers

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This resource has been adapted from ANSM's (formerly: The Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage) 1997 manual, "Preparing and Supporting Seasonal Staff" and is intended for supervisory staff.

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Supported Workers

Supporting your workers means supporting the success of your organization. As a supervisor or manager, it is your responsibility to ensure that new and returning workers are informed, protected and appreciated. At small organizations like community museums, it may seem like a lot of work to prepare and support seasonal workers, but this investment in your team goes a long way.

Preparing and supporting your workers can:

1. Improve the reputation of the organization.
2. Encourage better quality of work.
3. Inspire your team. [Studies show](#) that satisfied staff tend to be more creative and productive.
4. Attract and retain great workers.
5. Informed workers can better understand how to preserve the collection (i.e., if an interpreter is touching everything on display, the patrons of the museum are more likely to believe they can do the same).
6. Create a positive work environment.

As an organizational leader, it is your responsibility to:

1. Dedicate time to prepare yourself, the board and heritage organization for the new workers.
2. Place candidates in positions they can and will perform well.
3. Accommodate the needs of your workers to the best of your abilities.
4. Orient new workers at the beginning of their work term.
5. Communicate to workers what is expected of their attitude and work.
6. Make each worker feel that their job is important.
7. Provide training if workers are unfamiliar with or need improvement in their work.
8. Evaluate each worker's performance, and communicate your evaluations to them on a regular basis, not just at the end of the term.
9. Help each worker develop their skills and improve their performances.
10. Develop and maintain morale.
11. Ensure each worker's health and safety is protected.
12. Facilitate open communication between supervisors and workers.

One of the first steps in supporting your workers is understanding exactly what YOU want from this worker. What kind of traits are necessary for the job? What skills and knowledge are necessary vs. nice to have? Once you have identified what these are, you can build relevant job descriptions and hire accordingly. For more information on building job descriptions, check out ANSM's [Guidelines for Building Effective Job Descriptions](#).

Fair Hiring

Key Takeaway: Your hiring committee should be aware of the [Nova Scotia Human Rights Act](#) and the legal requirements they face to be non-discriminatory and accommodate candidates.

As an employment provider, you and the organization are required to follow the [Nova Scotia Human Rights Act](#) and the [Nova Scotia Labour Standards Code](#). This includes fair wages, treatment, non-discriminatory practices, and more. Discrimination is outlined as follows in the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act:

- (1) No person shall in respect of*
- (a) the provision of or access to services or facilities;*
 - (b) accommodation;*
 - (c) the purchase or sale of property;*
 - (d) employment;*
 - (e) volunteer public service;*
 - (f) a publication, broadcast or advertisement;*
 - (g) membership in a professional association, business or trade association, employers' organization or employees' organization,*
- discriminate against an individual or class of individuals on account of*
- (h) age;*
 - (i) race;*

- (j) colour;*
 - (k) religion;*
 - (l) creed;*
 - (m) sex;*
 - (n) sexual orientation;*
 - (na) gender identity;*
 - (nb) gender expression;*
 - (o) physical disability or mental disability;*
 - (p) an irrational fear of contracting an illness or disease;*
 - (q) ethnic, national or aboriginal origin;*
 - (r) family status;*
 - (s) marital status;*
 - (t) source of income;*
 - (u) political belief, affiliation or activity;*
 - (v) that individual's association with another individual or class of individuals having*
- characteristics referred to in clauses (h) to (u).*
- (2) No person shall sexually harass an individual.*
 - (3) No person shall harass an individual or group with respect to a prohibited ground of discrimination. 1991, c. 12, s. 1; 2007, c. 41, s. 2; 2012, c. 51, s. 2*

Beyond these legal requirements, your organization should consider your hiring practices as a reflection of your organization. This is the first impression that you'll be giving prospective workers. Candidates will want to see that your organization is being as fair and equitable as possible so that they can enter the hiring process with the same opportunities as anyone else. To ensure you're implementing fair hiring practices at your organization, consider the following:

Disclosing relationships

If anyone on the hiring committee or at the organization has a family or personal relationship with the candidate, that relationship should be reported to the committee. Especially in small communities, it isn't uncommon to know the candidates applying for a position, but any relationship should be disclosed to ensure that the candidate is not given an unfair advantage over others. In the case that a family member of the committee applies, that committee member should exclude themselves from the hiring process.

[Halifax Regional Municipality](#) defines family as:

- Family means a spouse/partner and also includes, in respect of either or both the employee and their spouse/partner:*
- A. a parent and the parent's spouse;*
 - B. a sibling, step-sibling or half-sibling and the spouse/partner of any of them;*
 - C. a child, including an adoptive child, and the spouse/partner of any of them;*
 - D. a child of an aunt or an uncle and their spouse/partner;*
 - E. a grandchild and their spouse/partner;*

- F. grandparent and their spouse/partner;*
- G. an uncle or aunt and their spouse/partner;*
- H. a nephew or niece and their spouse/partner;*
- I. a current or former foster parent or foster child;*
- J. a current or former ward or guardian; and*
- K. any other person who is residing in the household of the employee.*

Diverse Hiring Committee

It is a good idea to engage the committee in EDIA training so that members of the committee can learn about identifying their own unconscious, implicit, overt, prejudicial and other kinds of biases. The committee should strive to make unbiased decisions in hiring, and diversity within the committee (diversity in age, role at the organization, gender, race, etc.) can also help to achieve this goal. Having a diverse committee can also highlight a variety of skills and attributes needed for a successful candidate.

Providing Accommodations

After a candidate has been chosen for an interview, include in the interview message a request for the candidate to optionally disclose any accommodations they will need for the hiring process. Candidates should be ensured that all accommodation requests will be treated with respect, kept confidential, and the organization will do their best to accommodate all requests within their ability. Some accommodations can include mobility assistance for in-person interviews, or turning on closed captioning for virtual interviews. Consider all accommodation requests thoughtfully. Remember, a diverse team is an organizational strength!

Interviewing

Before the interview, ensure that your list of questions are fair and legal. If you're unsure of what you can or cannot ask, consult the [Nova Scotia Human Rights Act](#). In general, you should not be asking an interviewee about their age, race, religion, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, nationality, family or marital status, or political belief, affiliation or activity. Some exceptions apply (see [Nova Scotia Human Rights Act](#)); for example, you may ask if a candidate is legally entitled to work in Canada.

Interviews should be conducted by at least two people to reduce individual bias. Diversity in the interviewers should be a priority. Interviews should also be as consistent as possible among all candidates. All candidates should be asked the same questions which should all be based on the job description. Questions should highlight how the candidates respond to situations, not their personal opinions. Interviewers should take note of how the candidates answer the questions, not their impression of the candidate themselves. To make the interview process more inclusive, give candidates the questions ahead of time and a written copy to refer to during the interview. Candidates should also be encouraged to ask for clarification on the questions if necessary.

At the end of the interview, the candidate should be given the opportunity to ask questions, as well as add any additional information to their answers or offer up any additional details about their competency in the role. Once the candidate has finished, they should be informed when to expect a response from the committee (successful or unsuccessful).

Example interview questions:

Visitor services

Here at the museum we host many temporary exhibits. Unfortunately, visitors often come to the museum expecting to see an exhibit that has since closed. Can you give an example of a time when you had to tell a visitor or customer that their expectation will not be met?

Collections staff

Our collection is made up of 13000 objects and currently only about 2500 are digitized. Our goal is to photograph the entire collection (where possible) and upload these images into our database. Can you give an example of a time when you had to take on an overwhelming task? How did you keep yourself motivated?

Interview Debrief

If a candidate is unsuccessful after the interviewing process, the organization should provide the option to debrief with the candidate. This helps the candidate understand how they can improve interview skills, build a better application in the future, or if a similar role is a better fit for them. This also shows that the hiring committee has made a thoughtful decision to move forward with a different candidate.

Training

Whenever a new worker is brought on at the organization, they should be trained in the following areas:

1. Orientation
 - a. How to get around the museum, areas off-limits to the public, where to find washrooms, where to find equipment, where to take breaks and eat, where to find parking (if applicable)
2. Staff and Volunteers
 - a. Who's who at the organization: what are the other roles and who occupies them?
3. Emergency Preparedness
 - a. Where are the fire extinguishers? Is there an AED onsite? Where is the first aid kit? Are there hazards to be aware of? What do you do in case of fire, flood, theft, etc.? Where is this information located to refer back to?
4. Role specific training
 - a. What do you define as effective interpretation at the museum? How should collections be cared for? How do you turn on the lawn mower? How do you use the database?
5. Policies and procedures

- a. Review applicable policies (e.g., Collections Management Policy, Interpretation Policy, Personnel Policy, etc.) with the new worker and provide them with a copy and/or digital access to that information to refer back to.
6. Dealing with the public
 - a. How are complaints handled? What do you do if a dangerous person is onsite? What do you do if someone wants to donate objects? Where is cash stored?
7. Background information about the organization
 - a. How long have you been in operation? How old is the building? What is your purpose? Mandate? Is there something in particular that most visitors want to see? Are there any cool facts about the organization?
8. Tourist Information
 - a. Information regarding local attractions, upcoming events, frequently asked questions

Orientation is also the opportunity for you to get to know the worker. Ask the worker how you can best support them. For example, do they need written instructions or verbal? Should they be contacted via email or phone? Are there any accommodations needed for the worker?

Note about Summer Students: Remember, students are there to learn from you. Students should not be left to their own devices to learn how to do the job. Teaching them will help them succeed at the museum and in their career, as well as form a better understanding of how the museum works and hopefully build a good working relationship so that they might return the following year or recommend it to a friend or colleague.

Employee Handbook/Personnel Policy:

Part of supporting staff includes creating and sharing policies so that worker expectations can be set. A personnel policy or employee handbook should be given to new workers in print or digitally at the beginning of their time at the organization and should include information regarding:

- Accountability
 - What does accountability look like at the organization?
 - How do you report relationships?
- Harassment and discrimination
- Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility (EDIA)
- Vacation, holidays, sick leave
- Freedom of expression and dress policy
- Hiring and firing procedures
- How to report grievances
- Evaluation
- Training
- Working hours (including overtime)
- Benefits

All policies should also be dated and reviewed at an agreed upon interval. When the policy has been updated, it should be circulated to all workers.

Note: even an excellent policy is worthless if it is not used. To ensure the policy is used, it must be easy to understand, reflect the purpose of the organization and recognize the available resources. It must also be easily accessible to everyone at the organization through a shared drive.

Setting Goals

Setting goals is a great way to clarify work expectations and creates clear criteria to evaluate. A clear set of goals gives workers a distinct idea of what they are building towards and how to plan accordingly. Having a specific goal makes it easier to stay motivated as you know what you are moving towards, and seeing goals met is rewarding!

Start by having a conversation with the worker about the expectations they face in their role. This conversation should happen soon after orientation. This process should be collaborative so that the worker can ask questions to clarify the goals, and also include some personal development goals. The inclusion of personal goals can increase commitment to the organization if the worker is able to achieve milestones for their own development as well.

Goals should be specific, attainable, measurable and based on a suggested time line. It is a good idea to check in with the worker a few weeks later to see how they are doing. Workers may need assistance or resources provided to them to meet their goals. Supervisors should strive to facilitate these needs

To get started, try setting 3 work term goals and two personal development goals:

Work Goals:

1. Task (include how you will measure success):

This task will be completed by (date): _____

2. Task (include how you will measure success):

This task will be completed by (date): _____

3. Task (include how you will measure success):

This task will be completed by (date): _____

Personal Goals:

1. Task (include how you will measure success):

This task will be completed by (date): _____

2. Task (include how you will measure success):

This task will be completed by (date): _____

Evaluations

Evaluations are essential to improving the performance of an organization. Worker performance may also need to be evaluated to meet grant requirements. In general, a performance evaluation should take place for all paid workers at least once per year or work term (whichever is shorter). However, annual evaluations should not be the only time you check in with workers. Check in frequently with workers to see how they are doing and if they need help or clarification on a task. Regular evaluations also make sure that time is used effectively. If work is not completed to the regular or expected standard, you can correct course early, and prevent duplication of efforts.

Performance evaluations can be conducted by peers, the worker themselves, as well as by supervisors. Diversity of evaluations can help workers to advocate for themselves. Supervisors might not see all the work that a particular worker has completed, but perhaps their peers have. This will also show if there are discrepancies between how everyone perceives one person's work.

Evaluations are also used to stay accountable. If a worker is not meeting goals and their behaviour is unsatisfactory, these evaluations can give them the opportunity to see where they can improve. If no improvements are made, these evaluations can be used as part of fair dismissal.

The most important part of evaluation is communication. These are not meant to be unpleasant experiences, but instead an opportunity to discuss how to grow together as an organization and as individual workers.

Additional Support

Consider how your workers may need support in day-to-day operations. You should always check in with workers if they need accommodations, but there are also things you can do to make your workplace more accessible for everyone.

Consider the physical space:

- Lighting
 - Consider getting adjustable lighting at work stations. Can the lighting be bright enough for people with low vision? Can the lighting be dimmed for those who get headaches under bright fluorescent lights?
- Mobility access
 - Ensure access to workspaces. If access is difficult, can furniture be moved so that there are clear, wide pathways? Desk heights?
 - Consider clutter in the space. Could someone trip?
- Scents
- Signage?

There will be instances where the physical space cannot be adjusted to suit everyone's needs. For example, some collections require low light at all times. You are not expected to meet everyone's needs all the time, and not everyone is suited to every job. However, you should still work towards making the organization as equitable and accessible as possible.

Consider your approach to accessibility as a supervisor:

- Flexibility
 - Why must a task be done a certain way? Can it be adjusted?
- Check your biases
- Responses
 - Make sure your responses are measured and thoughtful. Try not to react instinctively and consider alternative methods. Can you find a solution together?
- Reliability and availability
 - Are you making yourself available to workers? Are you and other workers friendly? Do workers have the opportunity to talk to you about their questions, concerns, or even just a friendly chat?

Resources

1. [A Simple Guide to Canadian Copyright](#)
2. [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#)
3. [CMA Ethics Guidelines 2006](#)
4. First Aid Training
 - [Canadian Red Cross](#)
 - Offers in-person and virtual training

- Standard First Aid for Home and Work (includes wound care, respiratory and cardiac arrest, Opioid poisoning awareness information and more)
- CPR and AED for Home and Work

[St. John Ambulance](#)

- Offers in-person and blended training
 - Emergency/Basic First Aid
 - CPR and AED Training
5. [ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums 2026](#)
 6. [Impact Organization of Nova Scotia \(IONS\) Resource Library](#)
 7. [Pre-Interview Bias Reflection - Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia](#)
 8. [Pre-Interview Package template - Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia](#)
 9. [NS Health and Safety](#)
 10. [ReachAbility](#)
 11. [Reconsidering Museums](#)
 12. [Safety+](#)
 13. [Shifting Power Dynamics in the Hiring Process - Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia](#)
 14. [SkillsOnlineNS](#)
 15. [Small Museums Toolkit: A Handbook in Support of Moved to Action: Activating UNDRIP in Canadian Museums](#)
 16. [Supporting Neurodivergent Talent in the Workplace - University of Waterloo](#)
 17. [Understanding Team Working Styles template - Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia](#)
 18. [2019 Nova Scotia Human Rights Act](#)
 19. [2026 Nova Scotia Labour Standards Code](#)

Related ANSM Resources

[Guidelines for Building Effective Job Descriptions](#)

[Starting Strong - Making the Most of Your Work Placement](#)

[You Hired a Student, Now What?](#)