

Highlights of An Employer's WorkKeys Success Story

(The following information was taken from the ACT case study informational web site link at: <http://www.act.org/workkeys/case/index.html>)

WorkKeys Helps 911 Operators/Dispatchers Answer the Call May 2009

The Organization - 911 Communications Center, Lexington County, S.C.

The Challenge - Recruit and select 911 emergency call operators/dispatchers for a county-wide public safety communications office serving nearly 250,000 citizens

The Solution - WorkKeys job profiling and skills assessments

The Results - Reduced annual turnover by half, from 30% to less than 15%
Decreased training costs by half

The Lexington County 911 Communications Center handles an average of 30,000 emergency calls each month. That's 360,000 calls a year and about 1,000 calls each day. Staffed by only 36 operators (also known as dispatchers)—nine for each shift—it is vital that the team hires the right people with the right skills to serve the citizens of the county. Very few automated processes were in place at the center when Nikki Rodgers, 911 communications coordinator for Lexington County, joined the department nearly 15 years ago. A phone, pencil, and paper were the primary tools then, but today's 911 world has changed considerably. Operators now use technologies like Automatic Vehicle Location, Computer-Assisted Dispatch, sophisticated recording equipment, and Voice over Internet Protocol communications.

"911 is a specialized set of skills," according to Rodgers. "There's really no other job quite like it." Operators need computer skills, customer service skills, listening skills, stress management techniques, and the ability to concentrate in what can be a chaotic work environment. "And they need to have the ability to learn all that we need to teach them." Training a new operator can take six to 12 months, according to Rodgers. The national average for retaining 911 operators—sometimes referred to as their occupational "life expectancy"—is only two years. Dealing with high turnover, combined with extreme focus on quick action when lives are at stake, make it especially important that the right people are selected for the team.

"All 911 calls concern bad news," said Rodgers. "We don't get any other kind." This pressure takes a toll on operators by increasing their stress levels and making it difficult to leave the emotional aspects of the work behind at the end of a 12-hour shift. Rodgers reports that the top three reasons for losing 911 operators include:

- They don't have the skills to learn all they need to know and do
- They experience high stress levels
- They transfer to law enforcement or firefighting where they can directly serve and protect the public rather than summon help from others

For the three calendar years of 2005, 2006, and 2007, a total of 62 operators left the team. Rodgers estimates that it costs more than \$7,000 just to recruit and hire a new 911 operator, and that figure doesn't include the cost of training the new team member. This represents a significant drain on the resources available to a department that employs only 36 operators at any one time. Rodgers was convinced that something had to change. Rodgers was aware that WorkKeys

assessments could be used for preemployment testing and decided to learn more. In the summer of 2007, she summoned help from the Midlands Workforce Development Board (MWDB) in nearby Columbia. Aided by funding from the South Carolina Department of Commerce and Midlands Technical College, MWDB personnel were able to make the entire job profiling process easy and cost effective.

“The whole experience was wonderful,” Rodgers said. “MWDB spent a lot of time with our operators finding out exactly what they do, and they reported back with specific suggestions about which WorkKeys exams would test the most important skills needed for this job.” The job profile targeted three WorkKeys assessments—Listening, Locating Information, and Reading for Information—and established a minimum score of Level 3 on all assessments. Initial assessment costs are paid from the county budget; if an applicant needs to train and retake one or more assessments, the applicant must pay for subsequent tests. Rodgers agrees that the assessments identified by the job profile are a good fit for 911 operators. “Listening is a critical skill for the team.

Sometimes our operators need to interpret background noises beyond the spoken words,” she said. “The combination of assessments really helps us be sure that the new hires have the full complement of skills we’re looking for, not just one or two. And, if they have the right skills, training goes more smoothly and quickly, and the stress level of both the new hire and the assigned training ‘buddy’ is also reduced.” In the year since implementing WorkKeys for pre-employment testing, Rodgers reports that the center has not lost a single employee due to a skills issue. “Being able to wipe the number one reason why people leave or are dismissed off the table has been remarkable. WorkKeys tests have helped us find employees who can be successful doing this job.”

Rodgers initially believed that implementing the WorkKeys system would cost money, but it has not. She now understands its value. “It has saved money. The cost of the revolving door—hiring, training, letting people go; hiring, training, letting people go—is much higher than hiring the right people with the right skills to begin with. In fact, the revolving door has stopped.” The 911 Communications Center reports that its turnover has been reduced from slightly more than 30% to less than 15% in the first full year of implementation. The higher retention rate has saved training time, and cost, and allows for greater continuity and better teamwork.

Rodgers adds, “I would recommend this to anyone. It’s simple. In fact, it’s the easiest thing I’ve ever done. The folks at MWDB did it all. The results have been much better than I could have ever wished for. It’s great to see our employees be successful. I am hooked. It has been a great benefit for the center, and I believe, for the citizens of Lexington County we serve.”

Other success stories about companies who relied on the ACT’s WorkKeys Assessment System to help improve their business are highlighted at the following link: <http://www.act.org/workkeys/case/index.html>

WorkKeys and the National Career Readiness Certificate are registered trademarks of ACT, Inc.