

## Chapter 3: Evaluating written applications

### Criteria, process and inviting to interviews

#### Resources:

- [Zoom Recording](#) from the fall 2020 NAP mentor training
- [NAP Application Rubric Score Sheet](#)
- [San Juan Ranch Applicant Score Sheet](#)
- [Blank applicant overview spreadsheet](#)
- ["Tell me more" Questions for interviews](#)
- [Questions for References that elicit more detailed information](#)
- Email templates for communicating with applicants:
  - [Decline to Interview](#)
  - [Invitation to interview](#)
  - [Maybe/awaiting further developments](#)
  - [Decline post Interview](#)
  - [Congratulations Accepted](#)

Once applications open, you may be flooded with early eager applicants, or applications may trickle in. Some of the best apprentices were those that applied at the last minute, having rewritten their application numerous times in order to make it as perfect as possible.

The right apprentice for you not only meets your criteria, but is looking for the specific type of livestock, crops, management practices and philosophies you utilize in your operation. Evaluating applications includes determining the applicant's motivations and goals: what aspects of agriculture are they excited to learn? What values or information are driving their desire to apply? You might receive an application from a dynamic person with two years of experience, but if they want to learn about direct marketing and you don't do that, they may not be the best choice for you.

NAP has a specific process for evaluating applications that you tailor to your criteria. The program needs to be sure that all applications are given a fair review and applicants receive timely notice of whether they will be considered for the position or not. The following timeline gives an overview of the application process

#### Application Timeline

Mentors are strongly encouraged to stick with the timeline NAP staff outline each year, as apprentices apply to multiple NAP sites (as well as other jobs). For the 2021 season, this was the general schedule:

| Date            | Event   | Notes   |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Nov 1 - Dec 15  | Applications open and close   | Read and review as they come in   |
| Dec 15          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Select and contact applicants to invite to interview, decline or place on hold</i></li> <li>• <i>Determine your interview schedule for 1st round</i></li> </ul> | Determine your top 4-6 semi-finalists, use NAP email templates to send notice to <i>all</i> applicants as to their status |
| Jan 4           | Deadline for notifying all applicants as to whether they are invited to interview, won't be invited, or are in the holding pattern  | You may contact applicants sooner to set up interviews. <i>You must respond to all applicants by Jan 4.</i>               |
| Dec 26 - Jan 15 | First round interviews- please note that some mentors may move to their 2nd round of interviews during this time period   | Prepare interview script and specific questions for semi-finalists; do interviews   |
| Jan 15 - Jan 31 | Complete 2nd round interviews   | Complete 2nd round interviews and make offer to your top choice   |

### **Determine your Criteria: What do you want and need in an apprentice?**

Mentors find that a clear process with criteria determined in advance helps them be thorough and find a hidden gem of an applicant. In the past, mentors realized that without this they tended to be less thorough if they liked a few things right away in an application. A checklist of required skills and desirable traits can help you read between the lines to see positive characteristics in a novice or a 'red flag' issue in an applicant with some appealing skills and experience.

- What do you NEED, and how is this different from what you WANT. Most mentors hope for applicants with experience, but personality, proven long-term dedication to an extracurricular activity, or land ethic may be a better indicator of a great apprentice
- Remember, they are coming to learn, not just work, so genuine curiosity and commitment to regenerative agriculture might be more beneficial than years of experience.

- Do you have minimum requirements: is it essential that they have horse skills, heavy equipment experience, sales or customer service? These would be skills they must have upon arrival, rather than things they can learn as they go
  - This can differ year to year: for example, in 2017 past mentor site Ranney Ranch was focused on increasing their direct market so they wanted an apprentice with customer service and a cheerful and gregarious personality. In 2018 they had lots of infrastructure projects so they hoped for applicants with equipment experience.
- What personality traits you think will help them thrive at your location - humor, well read in relevant subjects, demonstrated self-study/initiative, etc.
- Applicants often don't have much experience so look for ways to assess their stick-to-it-tive-ness: athletics, anything like 4H, playing an instrument, or some other hobby, volunteering or extracurricular activity that demonstrates a multi-year commitment.
- How isolated is your operation, how easily will your apprentice be able to meet people in town, get involved with the community? You'll want to ask them about this during the interview, so consider this as you review applications.
- Are you able to consistently make yourself available to teach and review their learning, or will they need to be proactive in reminding you to do check ins and skill sheet meetings? What kind of student is best for the kind of teacher you are?
- If you anticipate a more stressful year with your business or your personal life (drought adaptation, a new baby in the family, etc) consider what skills and traits will help your apprentice thrive when you have a split focus--adaptability may be more important than tractor mechanics, for example
- You are trying to assess their strengths, weaknesses and whether what **you** offer is a good fit for **them**

**Design your Evaluation Process: Who is included, what's your timeline, how will you keep track?**

*Scoring System*

We strongly recommend that you create a clear scoring, note-taking system for reading and reviewing applications. Your criteria can be the basis for this, and NAP also has two score sheets mentors find useful, so look these over and adapt one to suit your criteria.

- [NAP Application Rubric Score Sheet](#)
- [San Juan Ranch Applicant Score Sheet](#)

*Read as they come in or at the end?*

You can read them as they come in or wait until applications close. Many mentors do both. A first read is done when the application comes in and initial sorting into categories like *Interested*, *Maybe* and *No Thank You* can occur. A second read of all the *Maybe* and *Interested* applications is done when applications close, more thorough notes and scoring occurs, so that a decision can be made as to who to interview.

- Tip: Some people find it useful to have a spreadsheet to keep track of applications: a table includes Name, Address, Ag experience, Your preferred skills/characteristics, Other Pros and Cons. Here's a blank spreadsheet for you to consider using: [Blank applicant overview spreadsheet](#)

### *Who to Include*

It's useful to have more than one set of eyes read and review applications. A manager has a different perspective than a co-worker, so even if you are the only official mentor, seek out input from others. If your family or employees will have interactions with the apprentice, get their input on what is most important to them.

- They can read the applications of people you are most interested in and give their comments
- Create a short summary of the pluses and questions for your top picks and ask others to review and give input.
- Have them contribute to your criteria so their concerns are embedded in your selection process from the start

Your NAP Coordinator can help you sort out which applicants are the best fit for you so ask for their assessment.

### *More than one mentor? Including others?*

A number of mentor sites have more than one mentor, or include an employee, foreman, or second-year apprentice in the application review process. Here's one way to do this:

1. The mentor team, including returning apprentices and/or foreman, determine collectively what issues or specific work this year will influence the list of preferred skills and traits in the apprentice.
2. Everyone in the mentor team does their own first read for overall sense of candidate; then a 2nd read to take notes
3. Some people like to print out the application and take notes right on the paper so they can refer to it during an interview with an applicant

4. Rank with the SJR score sheet, 0 to 5 scale, 0 is low, 5 is high: [San Juan Ranch Applicant Score Sheet](#)
5. Team shares comments/scores. Honest discussion occurs regarding different assessments of the applicants and who each person likes best. This review can illuminate blind spots in individual review
6. Don't forget to ask for input from your NAP Coordinator, especially if you have strong and varied opinions on your applicants and are struggling to narrow down your list.

### **Contacting References**

The NAP application asks for 2 professional and 1 personal reference. We recommend that mentors call them at some point in the process. You can call when first reading applications to help determine who to phone interview, after phone interview, or any other time in the process.

- There is value in waiting to call a reference until you have had the first interview, so that you learn about the applicant directly, initially, and then can formulate more specific questions for the reference.

[Here's a list of potential questions](#) to ask references, to generate more detailed information.

### **Applications Close; Choose your Semi-finalists**

In the week after applications close, schedule at least half a day to read/revisit and discuss applications right after the deadline.

- If you haven't already sorted them into Yes, Maybe, and No piles, do that now
- Ideally you'll have 4 to 6 top semi-finalists to interview
- Discuss any difference of opinion in the team as it relates to an applicant -- are there red flags for some and not for others?
- If you feel you need more information to determine if an applicant should advance to the interview stage or not, consider sending them a follow-up email to suss out details related to their work experience and long term goals as these apply to your apprenticeship. Here are some possible ["Tell me more" questions](#) (these can also be used during interviews).

### **Next Steps**

NAP asks mentors to do phone/video interviews of their 4-6 semi-finalists, in January, with finalist interviews in late Jan-early Feb, for a March start date. Historically, the

second interview was a site visit interview, but due to Covid and costs, many mentors now do the second interview as a video interview.

Create an interview schedule with at least 8 slots, each 1.5 hours, no more than 3 interview slots in a given day. Be sure to include options at different times of day (including early morning and later evening), to accommodate candidate work schedules.

→ If you are a new NAP mentor, schedule your dates and times with your NAP Coordinator

### **Communicating with your Applicants**

Once you have decided who to interview, who you won't interview, and who is a "maybe I'll interview", send the appropriate email to each applicant by the date set by the NAP staff.

- Send the "[Decline to Interview](#)" email to anyone you are sure you don't want to interview: i.e. you would rather not have an apprentice than take that person
- Send the "[Invitation to Interview](#)" email to those you will be interviewing for the first round
- Send the "[Maybe](#)" email to those who are your "B" list: people you might want to interview if your top picks end up not being a good fit.

Once all semi-finalists are signed up for an interview, draft another email to provide instructions for how to use whatever video platform you plan to use (Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts) and be sure that platform works for you. If you aren't familiar with these, ask your NAP Coordinator to help you choose one that works for you.

Guidelines for your interview process, plus sample interview questions and scripts are in the following chapter on interviewing.