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Teacher Kaydra Moses stops to pose for a smile as she leads an early elementary class through a playful freeze dance. Photo by Megan McCluskey, Misty's Dance Unlimited, Onalaska, Wisconsin.

Best Practices for the Hiring Process in Youth-Serving Organizations

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing need for private-sector youth-serving organizations (e.g., dance studios) to enhance the hiring process to ensure the cultural and financial health of the business and the safety and well-being of the students it serves. Historically—anecdotally—dance studios would not necessarily employ systematic practices when hiring. With no governing body or industry regulations, dance studio owners, for example, would not have any best practices to follow, leaving a gap in this area of their business. Through recommendations of sound hiring practices employed across small businesses, this article offers ways in which private youth-serving organizations can strengthen and systemize the hiring process, resulting in a healthier business, happier workers, and safer students.

As adults involved in the independent dance sector in various professional roles—16 years as a studio owner and 40 years as a dance instructor, with additional experience as choreographers, grant writers, and contributors as writers and editors to major industry publications—we have found that many independent-sector dance business owners, including studio owners, event owners, and nonprofit leaders, have insufficient knowledge about basic small business operations and practices. In the industry, we have observed firsthand how this knowledge void has affected student safety through the hiring of individuals with inadequate credentials, insufficient technical knowledge, or questionable moral character. In our personal experiences—and through discussions with fellow dance educators—we know these instances can and do affect untold numbers of youth dancers, potentially to the detriment of their physical safety, emotional safety, environmental security, self-perception, and overall well-being. As we worked together to develop educational content for Youth Protection Association for Dance™, it became clear that there are few resources to assist dance studio owners who choose to put student well-being at the forefront and make well-informed, safety-minded hires. Based on our experiences and spurred by our concerns, we are sure that dance studio owners—as well as other business owners in the private sector, such as convention and competition owners, nonprofit company directors, and others—can and should employ a series of best practices to ensure a thorough hiring process. These practices will better serve youth dancers by securing long-term employees who support the organization’s mission, are dedicated to their students’ health and safety, and will commit themselves to successful outcomes as directed by the business owner, director, or manager. Through this article, we present guidelines for these best hiring practices that could be implemented by any private, independent organization serving youth or youth dancers, such as dance studios.

There can be no success—business growth, dance technique, or otherwise—without a strong group of people to carry out the daily operations that support the company’s mission. In very small businesses, that “team” might be a solo owner or director and a series of contract workers, whereas larger organizations might field a team

of faculty and staff of up to 50 or more. Whether for-profit or nonprofit, companies whose business is in education must have reliable workers who are confident and comfortable working with parents and students. These employees are responsible not only for holding up the standards of the organization, but for protecting and nurturing impressionable children—a formidable and significant job.

COMMIT TO THE PROCESS

As a company leader with many responsibilities, you might find the hiring process overwhelming. It is true that hiring can be a demanding and time-consuming task. Step-by-step, with the knowledge gained here, you can establish systems that streamline the process—and perhaps even make it enjoyable. Whether long-term employees or short-term contractors, the people you hire have an impact on the financial and cultural success of your business. Having the right people on board leads to several benefits:

- *Increased productivity.* When people enjoy their work and their work environment, they are more likely to be efficient and accurate in what they do. Administrative staff take pride in their processes and communications; teachers approach each class with energy and enthusiasm.
- *Lower staff turnover.* When staff members experience the benefits of working for your organization, they are less likely to move on to “greener pastures.” The right people are not constantly looking for something better; they are excited about what is in front of them.
- *Stronger company culture.* Workers who are skilled, motivated, and a good fit for your company create a “culture of care” where dancers feel welcome and safe being themselves. As a result, the studio attracts students who thrive in this kind of environment.
- *Increased student safety.* When employees have integrity and believe in the company’s mission, they will take their responsibilities seriously—and that includes adhering to the training, policies, and procedures you have put into place to prioritize student safety.



Acrobatic Arts Certified teacher Amy Fortner demonstrates safe positioning to a group of students in acrobatics class. Photo by Megan McCluskey, Misty's Dance Unlimited, Onalaska, Wisconsin.

- *Increased parent and student satisfaction.* When parents and students feel seen, heard, and appreciated by your employees, their complaints and concerns go down. They accept the occasional blunder with grace, trusting that they are in good hands with people who will make it right.
- *A healthier bottom line.* Because employees are often your biggest expense, they can also be your most meaningful investment. There is a net positive impact on your studio's financial stability when you are spending less on hefty turnover and hiring costs.

PRIORITIZE DANCER HEALTH AND SAFETY

With millions of children involved in dance education, youth dance organizations must hold themselves to high standards when it comes to hiring the people who will interact with and be around those children. Business owners, executive directors, administrative staff, teachers, guest artists, and volunteers all contribute to an environment that supports and encourages students. There is a connectedness that develops in a youth-oriented education business, where student-to-student friendships and adult-to-student mentorships have a profound influence, no matter if the child is a student for a short time or a long one.

All adults play an essential role in proactively safeguarding students from physical, mental, and emotional harm. At your company, this might include seeking out credentialed or specific trainings for yourself and your staff, establishing emergency protocols, creating guidelines to protect students from harm, and other actions. Consider the following areas of student well-being and these example trainings.

- *Student, client, and staff physical safety:* CPR/first aid certification.
- *Student mental and emotional health:* Youth Mental Health First Aid certification.

- *Emergency readiness protocols:* Creating an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) as suggested by the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Health & Safety Administration (OSHA); engaging in active shooter training with local law enforcement officers.
- *Child sexual abuse prevention education:* Darkness to Light's Stewards of Children®; Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policies, U.S. Center for Safesport™
- *Continuing education:* Engaging a physical therapist to review strength-training protocols for pre-pointe dancers or to implement a pointe readiness assessment, a registered dietitian to discuss eating disorder warning signs with studio staff, or a special needs teaching professional to instruct teachers who work with students who are differently abled.
- *Other:* Diversity training to cultivate a welcoming atmosphere for all students, faculty, and families.

It is vital that company leaders clearly state to prospective workers that their role within the organization—however big or small—comes with a responsibility to protect and promote the students' well-being. Be sure to include this emphasis in job descriptions, review it during interviews, reiterate it during onboarding, and discuss it periodically throughout a worker's time at your organization.

IMPLEMENT A MULTISTEP SCREENING AND INTERVIEW SYSTEM

After advertising for an open position (or receiving referrals) and collecting a pool of applicants, it is time for you to determine the appropriate candidates for the job. Many times, applicants can be removed quickly from candidacy because they do not meet the minimum or preferred qualifications of the job description. Be sure the qualifications truly meet the needs of the position, however. Educational qualifications, for example, which can be expensive to acquire and not equally accessible to all candidates, might not be required if the candidate has extensive professional experience or is willing to be trained. Look at what the position truly needs and start there to whittle down the pool to the most likely prospects.

Applicants who do meet the qualifications will need to prove that they fit your company's needs and culture. A multistep screening and interview process ensures there is a mutual fit—it is always better to hire slowly than to rush through this key task. A thorough screening and interview process can prevent problems.

Throughout the process, remember this quote, attributed to Peter Schutz, former chief executive of Porsche Corporation and motivational speaker in business leadership: "Hire for character; train for skill." Skills can be trained and developed, but character is part of someone's personality. It reflects their honesty, reliability, and temperament. These steps will provide the attention to detail you need to hire the right person.

1. Get a quick but important first impression of someone by requesting a short video submission. Ask for a brief message that includes name, contact information, and why they are interested in your company and this position.
2. In lieu of—or in addition to—a pre-interview video, send a brief questionnaire or conduct a short call (or video conference). This is an opportunity to gain insight into the applicant’s personality—not necessarily their skill level. If someone is not a good match for your organization or if you sense any red flags, the process stops here. Be sure to take time to reflect on any implicit biases that might affect your decision-making. Ask yourself if you could be reacting to a subconscious response to someone’s race, gender, or body type, and if so, continue to screen the candidate with thoughtful questions about their related education or experience. True red flags, such as an applicant’s inability to provide current references or a flippant attitude toward safety, should not be ignored.
3. Applicants who pass the initial screening(s) should be invited to a face-to-face interview. This is your chance to ask candidates about qualifications, skills, and competencies: Those who are a good fit will be prepared and professional. Be prepared to listen more than talk. Take notes and observe body language.
4. Candidates for a teaching position should have an opportunity to teach a sample class or, at minimum, share a lesson plan or video of a class they have taught. If there is not a class available for them to teach, arrange for a guest class by inviting a small group of students to participate at no charge. Observe how the prospective teacher interacts with the students, which is just as important as the material being taught. If the sample class is taught to middle school or high school students, meet with them briefly after class to ask for their feedback. What was their class experience like? How did they perceive the prospective teacher’s demeanor, the pacing of the class, and the material covered? Consider how the students’ perspectives align—or not—with your own observations.
5. Similar to prospective teachers, candidates for an administrative position should have the opportunity to perform a trial task, such as designing or copywriting social media posts, shadowing a current employee at the front desk, or inputting data into a spreadsheet.
6. Following a successful interview or sample class, it is time to arrange another in-person meeting. Ask candidates to bring any questions they have for you. Ideally this second meeting will take place offsite, perhaps over coffee, where you can observe how the candidate interacts with others in public. After this meeting you might know your decision, but if not, schedule a third interview or end the process here.
7. Ready to hire? Prior to making your final hiring decision and extending an offer, conduct reference checks and background checks to ensure the candidate is, to the best of your knowledge, safe to work with children. Be sure you understand the state laws that govern reference checks, background checks, and job offers. Consult with an employment attorney in your state to ensure compliance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A HANDBOOK AND CODE OF CONDUCT

An employee handbook should be distributed to all full-time and part-time staffers. Handbooks should answer all employment questions about dress code, time off, pay, and more; they should also function as a guidebook for company leaders. With all systems well thought out in advance and secured in writing, employers know where they stand, and employees know exactly what is expected of them and what they can expect in return. It assures fairness, eliminates knee-jerk reactions, supports decision-making, and provides safety and stability for both employers and employees.

Whereas the employee handbook functions as an educational tool and reference material on company policy, procedures, job responsibilities, and more, the code of conduct serves as an employee pledge to uphold the organization’s standards through proper behavior. Through its outline of expectations, it allows company leadership to set the tone for professionalism and competence. To create a code of conduct, consider what constitutes a model employee in areas other than job competence—effort, attitude, respect, dependability, consistency—as reflected through the organization’s values and purpose.



Students learn how to spring into sautés with teacher Dennis Williams in this beginning-level movement class. Photo by Megan McCluskey, Misty's Dance Unlimited, Onalaska, Wisconsin.

HIRING GUEST TEACHERS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS

Hiring the right guest teachers or choreographers is about more than finding talent: It is about finding people whose talent and character align with your company's standards. Only bring people into your classrooms who will respect your business's culture and prioritize your students' well-being. Not only does this show care for your dancers, but it can be the start of a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship between your organization and an industry professional.

Start by asking trusted friends in the industry for referrals; ask prospective choreographers to submit a reel for you to review. Remember to check references and run a background check before contracting. Sometimes guest artists and choreographers fall through at the last minute. If you must find a replacement quickly and time does not allow for a background check to be completed, run a search of the candidates' names and aliases on the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Registry (see <https://www.nsopw.gov>) and assign staff supervision during the guest's time at the studio.

As you coordinate with guest teacher candidates, clearly define the expectations of the proposed contract. A guest teacher or choreographer contract might include (but is not limited to) expected attendance and the number of expected rehearsals; timeline to completion of the choreography; expectations for music, movement, and costuming; intellectual property rights (who owns the choreography); and compensation. Be sure to obtain a W-9 for all guests hired as independent contractors.

PROPERLY CATEGORIZE ALL WORKERS

Like all small businesses, youth-serving organizations must be in legal compliance with how workers are categorized for tax purposes. Some company leaders, though, are unaware (or unclear) about how to properly categorize their workers. Because of specialization of genres or other factors (e.g., scheduling), dance teachers and other staffers can work as few as one or two hours per week, leading some business owners to assume that worker is an independent contractor, not an employee. As the following summary shows, though, this is not always the case.

There are two employment categories in the United States: employee and independent contractor. (Note that the information presented here should not be considered professional accounting advice, but might prompt useful questions to ask your tax professional or employment attorney.) An employee of your business works under your direction and is subject to your organization's business hours, class schedule, classroom curricula, and employee policies. As the employer, your company is responsible for each employee's payroll tax withholding

requirements and pays an employer's share of those taxes, issuing a W-2 to each employee each tax year. According to the Internal Revenue Service, "an individual is an independent contractor if the payer [employer] has the right to control or direct only the result of the work and not what will be done and how it will be done" (see <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/independent-contractor-defined>). Independent contractors pay their own employment taxes, and might receive a 1099 from the company each tax year, if they have met certain criteria.

To better understand the way employment categories affect your company, consult with an employment attorney and your accountant to ensure your business is compliant with federal, state, and local laws and tax requirements. To find an employment attorney, ask for referrals from fellow business owners, seek out your local Small Business Development Center, or search for attorneys who specialize in education or the arts.

USE EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENTS OR CONTRACTS

Without neutral documentation between an employer and an employee, vague expectations reign. Documentation clearly establishes the rights and responsibilities of both parties. Its unambiguous content closes any gaps in understanding how the employment term will operate. This helps prevent confusion and gives a clear record of the agreed-on terms of employment should any disputes arise.

Employers and employees "stand a little taller" when they know there are professional terms in place; there is a sense of mutual integrity, respect, and trust. Consider an employee who struggles with consistent attendance. Having a clearly stated employment agreement gives you a place of reference to reiterate attendance expectations. With this reference point it is a much smoother and simpler conversation centered around facts, not ruled by emotions. Employers have confidence in the employee's agreement to the terms, and employees have confidence in the employer's promises and protections. Although uncommon in dance education businesses, legal disputes regarding employment do happen. This can be costly in both time and money, in addition to causing stress for both parties. Employment agreements or contracts can serve as evidence in the event of a legal dispute—provided the documentation was originally created or reviewed by an employment attorney.

Whether you have a few employees or many, you are an employer who should strive to operate a professional company with high standards and expectations. Your employees, too, deserve to work for a company that operates with professionalism and professional courtesies. Having employment documentation in place ensures that you can

foster positive and productive relationships with your staff members. It offers peace of mind for both parties. It also collectively raises the professional standard and reputation of the dance industry.

SAFELY ENGAGE WITH VOLUNTEERS

Many youth-serving organizations could not function without a host of helping hands to carry the load. From prop construction to backstage helpers, volunteer roles provide your company's clients (parents, grandparents, and alumni) with a hands-on connection to their children's dance education and experience. These hard workers are often your studio's biggest cheerleaders.

Remember that once you have accepted someone as a volunteer, they fall under the company's purview. In other words, you are responsible. Especially if the volunteer roles involve being alone with students or being in physical proximity to students—for example, chaperoning for an out-of-town convention—it is a good idea to run background checks. Make sure your insurance policy covers these volunteers and that they comply with all legal requirements.

Additionally, even if the volunteer role seems self-explanatory, it is necessary to offer some training. Clearly communicate all responsibilities, follow up afterward to receive feedback and offer suggestions, and fully document any issues or incidents.

OFFER ONGOING COACHING AND TRAINING TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

Professional development is important, and, equally so, it empowers your workers to offer their best. Adopting a philosophy of "always learning, always growing" demonstrates to your employees that they are far more important than just someone who is filling a class or a need on the schedule. At your organization, staffers will find opportunities to better themselves, discover new strengths, and make confident decisions. This personal growth will in turn lead to improved classroom leadership and healthy student outcomes.

Ongoing coaching and training can come in the form of peer-to-peer mentorship among veteran and new employees, in-house workshops by master teachers or other guest experts (e.g., a sport psychologist or dietitian), or external opportunities to study specific curricula or earn continuing education credits. Create a budget for professional development and implement a system for employees to partake in opportunities that fit their schedule and specialty areas of work.

Employees who are open to learning and growing will want to do their best to ensure students are safe and developing into caring, conscientious people. For each worker, it starts from within and becomes a part of who they are: a supporter of the greater mission to ensure that dance is a safe and joyful activity for the dancers today, tomorrow, and for generations to come.

For more information, peruse these resources for best practices in employment for youth-serving organizations:

- Small Business Development Centers: <https://www.sba.gov/local-assistance/resource-partners/small-business-development-centers-sbdc>
- Internal Revenue Service: <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/independent-contractor-self-employed-or-employee>
- Federal Trade Commission: <https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/employer-background-checks-your-rights>
- Find a lawyer: <https://www.lawyers.com>
- Occupational Safety & Health Administration: <https://www.osha.gov/etools/evacuation-plans-procedures/eap>
- American Red Cross: <https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/cpr>
- American Heart Association: <https://cpr.heart.org/en/>
- Youth Mental Health First Aid: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/youth/>
- International Association for Dance Medicine and Science: <https://www.iadms.org>
- U.S. Center for Safesport: <https://maapp.uscenterforsafesport.org/why-maapp/>
- Stewards of Children® by Darkness to Light: <https://www.thenewstewards.org/>

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