



TOMORROW'S
LEADERS
TODAY

Career moves

Are you ready for school leadership?

ASPIRING
HEADTEACHERS

Resource

Career Moves is part of a suite of materials produced by NCSL to support the development of school leaders. Other titles in the series include:

Leadership succession: an overview

Turning Heads - a guide to marketing your school for prospective headteacher applicants

Greenhouse schools - practitioner research reports into developing leaders

Recruiting headteachers and senior leaders

What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances

All publications are free to download from www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday, together with further information on succession planning.

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Section 1:

About this guide

This guide is for people who have the passion and potential to lead schools.

You may be an experienced deputy, looking to take the next step to your own headship, or you may currently be on the fringes of the leadership team, thinking about the next stages of your career pathway. More likely, you will be somewhere in between. Either way, you will be aiming to step up to headship in the next five years.

Whatever your current position, you should find something in this guide that will help you plan and take your next career step.

Different readers will find different sections of the guide useful.

If you are already actively applying for headship, the later sections, which focus on the recruitment process, are most relevant to you. The section on career planning and development of your career portfolio will be less relevant; you have probably passed through those stages already.

Similarly, if you are at an earlier stage on the career path, perhaps before National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH), then the planning and preparation sections are likely to be most relevant.

About this guide

Section 1: Introduction

Section 2: This section takes a pragmatic view of career planning. It offers themes that guide a real-world approach to career management. It explores the goal of headship as a target for career progression and charts some of the development routes that are available to get there.

Section 3: This section focuses on recruitment in particular, looking at the dynamics of the current headship market. It looks at how you can prepare for the recruitment process and develop a clear proposition that defines your experience.

Section 4: This section explores the challenge of recruitment and selection processes from a candidate's perspective. Whilst the section is focused specifically on headship application processes, some of the general themes are applicable to recruitment more generally. It takes a step-by-step approach to a typical recruitment process, considering how you can best present yourself at each stage.

Section 2:

Career planning

Your career: your plan

Career planning is about making choices – exactly the kinds of choices that will have characterised your career to date. Your choices about the training you have undertaken, the places you have wanted to live and the jobs you have accepted have all shaped your career plan until now. For almost everyone, career pathways emerge from a complex combination of personal and professional aspirations, charting a pragmatic course between ambition and opportunity.

This section builds on that practical perspective of career planning. Its starting point is that there is nothing mysterious about career planning. You've done it already. Whether consciously or not, you have successfully planned your career to date. The next career step may bring new challenges, but the planning processes are the same.

The section builds on existing career frameworks and assessment tools, many of which will already be familiar. In fact, ideally you should find no new materials in this section, only new ideas for how to use them. The school leadership field is particularly well served with skills frameworks and assessment mechanisms. School leaders have access to a wealth of resources to aid planning. Use them and ensure that your planning stays at the heart of the professional mainstream.

Crucially, this section recognises that effective career planning does not take place in a vacuum. The work–life balance you aspire to is as important a factor as your professional goals.

In addition, this guide deliberately juxtaposes career planning with an examination of recruitment processes. Effective planning should help you secure your next job. Career planning is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Five characteristics of real-life career planning

- 1. You have an understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses.** This is the foundation. If you know what you do well, you are also likely to understand what you enjoy doing, which is important for the future. This is also the key to setting the priorities for your development plan and, critically, how to best sell yourself to a future potential employer.
- 2. You are alive to changing models of leadership and what might be required in the future.** Headship today is different from 10 years ago. To plan for a headship of the future, therefore, you need to be alive to policy trends and changing patterns of leadership. It is possible that your dream job doesn't yet exist.
- 3. You have a sense of your broad career goals and the standards you need to reach.** You can't see into the future, but you can set goals as far as the horizon. If you can set goals, you can also define the standards you need to reach to help you achieve your goals. In turn, that means you can define your development needs.
- 4. You own your development plan to help you meet those standards.** Your development plan is how you make progress through your career plan.
- 5. You can communicate your proposition effectively in the recruitment market.** In other words, you can convince other people that you can do what you say you can.

Adopting a career-planning mindset

Of course, career planning requires some basic tools to help you assess your current position, identify any development needs and develop your skillset.

However, effective career planning is as much about mindset as it is about practical processes.

Stay open to new possibilities

The school leadership agenda is changing fast. Roles that you might not have considered previously may now meet your career goals. As schools enter into federations and other collaborative arrangements, new models of school leadership are emerging that may provide new kinds of headships and new career opportunities. To take advantage, you must be open to new possibilities.

Be ready to challenge your own perceptions. Attitudes towards headship provide a sharp example of the gap that can open between perception and actual experience. Fewer than 30 per cent of non-headteacher school leaders would describe headship as “the best job in the world”, but once in the job, 70 per cent of serving headteachers say just that (NCSL Annual Opinion Survey of School Leaders, 2006). Preconceived fears about workload fade in the face of the actual satisfaction of having professional autonomy, leadership and influence.

Think broadly

Don't saddle yourself with analogies between career planning and career ladders. Ladders offer only one route that goes either up or down. Real-life career planning takes place across a framework, where people move in all directions. Initiatives such as the introduction of ASTs have opened new routes to leadership, whilst the extended schools agenda is opening the possibility of leadership roles across multi-professional organisations.

Keep your plan real

A career plan should provide a route to a destination, or at least to the next staging post if you are uncertain about your final destination. That means it must be part of your mainstream working life, rooted into your performance appraisal and continuing professional development (CPD) processes, for example, rather than kept in a separate folder.

Career plan or career framework?

School leadership is changing. New school structures are giving rise to new models of leadership, in turn giving rise to new roles and career opportunities.

In addition, individuals' career expectations – and pathways – are changing. In the economy as a whole, the concept of career has been transformed by modern business trends and shifting social attitudes. The landscape in teaching has changed too.

Today, career pathways are multiple, not singular. People can move within a matrix, not a hierarchy. They take breaks and return. And career decisions can lead individuals in and out of the school environment, across agencies and other organisations, still arriving at headship.

In this environment, a career plan must be a flexible concept too, perhaps better thought of as a framework. It should capture your broad ambitions and goals, but enable and encourage you to flex to circumstance and opportunity as they arise.

Whether you think in terms of a plan or a framework, your career goals must be personal to you. They should reflect your personal aspirations as well as your professional goals. In the end, the only person who will manage your career is you. You need other people to help you along the way, but only you can drive it. You must own your career path.

Creating your own career path

The tools you use to develop your own career goals, and the format you use to capture them, will vary from person to person. The route you use depends on your starting point – for example, how clearly you can see your goals already – and on finding a process and output that work for you.

You can get some practical ideas for how to chart your own career path from the Professional and Career Development section of Teachernet. The section includes outline templates for building up your own career map and suggestions for constructing your own professional portfolio. You can access these resources at www.teachernet.gov.uk/development

Whatever the output, the process of defining your goals involves some common themes.

1. Think about how things might be, not how they are now

Remember that you are trying to identify goals for the future, not the present. The world will be a different place. Are you sure that your thinking and ambition are not being restricted by current, or even outdated, concepts of school leadership? Equally, are you sure that your perceptions of, say, headship are accurate?

Remember that you will be a different person in the future too. Goals that seem daunting now may not seem the same in the future when you have greater experience. Think back over your career to date. Did earlier career steps, such as joining a senior leadership team for the first time, seem large at the time but very manageable afterwards? Apprehension is a natural part of career planning, but it is a barrier that you have almost certainly overcome already in your career.

2. Understand your own motivations and drivers

Do you understand enough about yourself and your personality both to capitalise on your strengths and to allow for your weaknesses? Can you define what you enjoy doing and want to do more of in the future? Do you understand what motivates you, or how you personally would define success?

These are complex issues, but they can help illuminate potential future career paths. There is a wide variety of tools available to help you work through these issues, from occupational personality questionnaires to 360-degree appraisal exercises. All need to be part of a wider assessment process within school or your local authority. This is where you need other people's help.

3. Be practical

Career goals must be practical. Be realistic about issues such as geography: would you move for the right opportunity, or are you focusing your career within a particular geographical location? What financial reward do you require? Salary is rarely a prime motivator, but you also have practical commitments you must meet in order to function.

4. Don't be afraid of being opportunistic

Don't assume that career progression means that you have to change jobs or organisations. Are there ways that you can develop your existing job by finding ways to add value to the school whilst broadening your experience at the same time? What problems exist in your current school to which you may be able to provide solutions?

Are there ways in which you add value informally already? For example, what issues do colleagues bring to you for advice even though they are not within your current remit? Are there ways to formalise that role to exploit your experience more widely?

Finally, concentrate on your own career planning, and don't be unduly distracted by other people's career patterns. Sometimes it can seem that everyone has a more organised approach to career planning than you. Colleagues seem to have planned a series of logical career moves, to have taken the right role at the right time and never to have put a foot wrong. It is rarely true. For almost everyone, career management is a process of balancing aspiration against opportunity, with unexpected twists and turns. That's just real life.

In Leadership Development and Personal Effectiveness (NCSL, 2005), Professor John West-Burnham argues that the crux of effective leadership development is self-directed learning: intentionally developing or strengthening an aspect of who you are, who you want to be, or both. This first requires getting a strong image of your ideal self, as well as an accurate picture of your real self: who you are now. Such self-directed learning is most effective and sustainable when you understand the process of change and the steps to achieve it as you go through it. To download this publication, go to www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

National Standards for Headteachers

Like any plan, start with the end in mind. If that end is headship, your target is extremely well defined.

National Standards for Headteachers provides a generic framework that defines the knowledge, expertise and understanding that you will need as a head. They are applicable to all headteachers, irrespective of phase and type of school. The standards are also used to identify threshold levels of performance for NPQH assessment, so if you have not yet completed NPQH the standards are required reading.

To illustrate how the standards might apply in different contexts, National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has published a series of documents that show how the standards can be linked to:

- rural schools.
- urban primary schools.
- extended schools.
- nursery schools.
- small schools.
- schools with a religious foundation.

Further information

- National Standards for Headteachers.

<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk>

- National Standards for Headteachers in Focus: a series of publications that illustrate how the standards apply in different settings.

www.ncsl.org.uk/nationalstandards

Who is being appointed to headteacher posts?

The following data is collated from the annual survey undertaken by Education Data Surveys (EDS) on behalf of National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). The survey tracks actual recruitment to school leadership roles each year, providing information about the candidates who are actually being appointed by governing bodies.

Whilst there is a wealth of data available about the profile of current school leaders, for example from NCSL, the EDS data provides a snapshot of how the recruitment market is assessing how candidates meet headship standards.

Table 1: Headteacher appointments in 2005–06

Age on appointment	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Under 35	10%	2%
35–39	22%	10%
40–44	25%	23%
45–49	21%	39%
50+	22%	26%

Sex	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Female	70%	38%
Male	30%	62%

Job role prior to appointment	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Substantive headteacher already	28%	18%
Acting headteacher	22%	19%
Deputy headteacher	38%	54%
Assistant headteacher	5%	4%
Other	8%	10%

Source: Education Data Surveys, 2006

How do you measure up?

If your goal is headship, the National Standards for Headteachers give you an explicit target for your personal career planning. They also give you a ready-made measuring stick to assess your current level of career experience.

Each standard sets out:

- clear expectations about the knowledge that you are expected to have developed to become a headteacher.
- the professional qualities that you are likely to demonstrate, and the abilities that you will have as a result.
- examples of the actions you will be able to perform.

Of course, if you have been through the NPQH process, the national standards will be very familiar to you. You will have assessed your own practice against the standards and developed a strong sense of your own strengths and weaknesses against them. You will know, too, that the journey towards the standards is never complete. There are always ways to enhance your portfolio of career experiences to demonstrate your competence against the standards.

If you have not yet experienced NPQH, even a rapid review of the standards will give you an immediate feel for how your career experience is likely to measure up. If, for each standard, you think of the practical examples of your own achievements that you would offer to demonstrate your credentials in each area, you will quickly get a sense of those areas where you have several examples and those where you have none.

Wherever you are, pre- or post-NPQH, the standards give you a clear target for career planning.

To move forward you need to know where you stand now. How does your experience measure up against each of the national standards?

Again, there is no need to overcomplicate this or to create additional work for yourself. The self-assessment tools you need are already at your fingertips. Keep things simple, practical and part of your everyday working life.

Here are four means of self-assessment that everyone can access.

1. Performance management

The formal performance management process in school should provide you with a means of assessing your experience to date and, more importantly, with a springboard to plan your development for the future. If it doesn't deliver this, it isn't structured properly. Performance management should be seen as a professional entitlement, not as something that is done to you.

The introduction of new performance management arrangements from September 2007 provides the framework for effective performance management. The aims of the new arrangements are:

... to develop a culture where teachers feel confident and empowered to participate fully in performance management; acknowledgement of teachers' professional responsibility to be engaged in effective, sustained and relevant professional development throughout their careers and to contribute to the professional development of others; and the creation of a contractual entitlement for teachers to have effective, sustained and relevant professional development ...

Teachers' and Headteachers' Performance Management Guidance, Rewards and Incentives Group, November 2006

An effective performance management process is the foundation of your career planning; it is how you get an objective assessment of skills and experience and identify, and fund, the pathways to further development.

You can find more information at :

Training and Development Agency for Schools

www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/performance_management

Rewards and Incentives Group

www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/p/pm_guidance_october_2006.pdf

2. NPQH application tools

The application process for NPQH takes candidates through a structured self-assessment against the National Standards for Headteachers. However, you can use the self-assessment process independently without actually applying for NPQH. It is available online and gives you easy access to an assessment process targeted specifically at preparation for headship.

There are two tools.

First, a personal reflection exercise offers a ready reckoner questionnaire that invites you to consider your impact on your school as a whole. Working alone, you could use the exercise to give you a sense of potential career development needs, perhaps before an appraisal session, or you could use it as a framework for a discussion with your head or line manager.

In fact, even if you have been through the NPQH process successfully, the self-reflection exercise is a good reminder of the headings you might use to collect together evidence of your achievements to be used in future job applications. It can also help you spot those areas where you have fewer tangible achievements to offer, that is, the gaps you might need to plug.

Second, the core of the NPQH application form is also available online. You can download the core questions without starting an actual application. Again, the questions force you to audit your career experience in the context of the National Standards for Headteachers. The process challenges you to provide examples of your achievements and expertise. You will quickly get a sense both of those areas where you have examples of achievements to offer and of those where you do not.

The NPQH assessment tools will be most useful to people who have not yet applied for NPQH, but they are not irrelevant to those who already hold the qualification. The NPQH application form provides a framework to collect together a portfolio of your achievements, which you will need for the job application process. Better still, it is not unusual to find local authority headship application forms based explicitly on the national standards. The process of completing such application forms is much easier if you have already collected together your portfolio of career achievements.

You can access the self-reflection exercise at:

www.ncsl.org.uk/npqh

You can access the core application questions at:

www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes/npqh/npqh-apply

3. Your future job referees

This is where your career plan can be tactical as well as practical.

Effective career plans are not constructed in a void; they are a pathway to an eventual goal: headship. At some point in any future application process you will need to call on the support of personal referees. At the very least, you need to have a good sense of how they are likely to respond to a reference request. What do they see as your strengths and weaknesses? Much better, however, is that your potential referees are engaged in your quest for headship, working with you to help you achieve your goal. In simple terms, don't just think of job referees as the names you have to put on an application form but nurture them as potential supporters and advocates.

In reality, you have little choice about potential referees. For most applications, potential employers will expect to see your current headteacher and someone from your local authority. Whilst you will obviously have a relationship with your headteacher, it may not always be the case that you have a profile with potential referees inside the local authority. If that is so, how will they write a reference about someone they don't know? You need to engage them early.

Referees can also help you self-assess and career plan. Local authority referees, in particular, can give you access to opportunities on a larger scale, opening new networks and gateways to experience practice in other schools.

4. Feedback from job interviews

If you see headship as a short-term target, this is the best kind of assessment of your readiness for headship, direct from the cut and thrust of the recruitment market.

However well you might plan to reach the goal of becoming a headteacher, in the end you must convince a governing body that you are ready. Whilst every interview should be approached with the aim of getting the job, if you are not successful it can still be a valuable assessment tool to chart any gap between your current level of experience and your goal. The later sections of this guide deal with the interview process and gaining feedback. The advantage of interview feedback as a method of assessment is that it helps you put the national standards into the context of your real-world practice. It can also provide a sharp reflection of the level of your personal behaviours and qualities: your ability to generate confidence, communication skills and capacity to engage.

Personal development planning

Through self-assessment, you can measure the gap between where you are now – your current skills and abilities – and where you want to be eventually: headship. A development plan sets out the practical steps you are going to take to close that gap.

There is nothing difficult or daunting about planning your own development. It is only what you have done, whether consciously or not, in your career to date. At each stage of your career you have developed your experience, consolidated what you have learnt and taken on a new role.

In fact, in some ways the task of charting a development plan towards headship can be more straightforward than the development routes you may have taken so far. For a start, there is a whole range of formalised, nationally accredited learning pathways available that have the explicit purpose of helping you reach the National Standards for Headteachers. There is no need to stumble along alone. NCSL programmes, for example, provide the equivalent of satellite navigation to enable you to chart a route, as long as you know how to use the technology.

So don't overcomplicate this. Development planning should feel mainstream, part of the way you work, using existing management mechanisms and performance management systems. If it doesn't feel like that, it is more likely to signal a flaw in local management arrangements than in your thinking.

Development pathways

If you take the time to look, you are unlikely to be short of ideas and suggestions for activities and programmes to build up your development plan. In fact, so much exists that it can be a challenge in itself to build up a picture of what is available, and to select those development activities that are likely to work best for you. In any event, don't reinvent wheels.

This section provides signposts to some of the potential pathways to consider.

National level

NCSL development for the profession is structured around the **Leadership Development Framework (LDF)**. It is designed to recognise the different skills, expertise and learning required at points in a school leader's career, up to and beyond headship. Three of the stages focus specifically on career pathways that take leaders towards headship: emergent leadership, established leadership and entry to headship. Two further stages explore opportunities for serving heads.

Leadership Development Framework – Emergent Leadership

This stage is for teachers starting to take on leadership and management responsibilities, including heads of subject or area and subject co-ordinators.

The key programmes in this area are:

- **Equal Access to Promotion?** – a professional development support programme targeted at black and minority ethnic teachers in middle management.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/eap

- **Fast Track Teaching** – an accelerated leadership development programme for teachers in the early years of their careers.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/fasttrack

- **Future Leaders** – piloting in 2006, Future Leaders is a new initiative to identify and develop the skills of leaders to run the most challenging of urban schools, run in collaboration with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) and the charity Absolute Return for Kids (ARK).

More at:

www.ncsl.org.uk/futureleaders
www.future-leaders.org.uk

- **Leading from the Middle** – a 10-month professional development programme for groups of two to four middle leaders plus one leadership coach in primary, secondary and special schools.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/lftm

- **Leadership Pathways** – a new modularised programme that provides personalised leadership learning; it is designed to be flexible so as to suit an individual's contexts, needs and spheres of influence.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershippathways

Leadership Development Framework – Established Leadership

This stage is for experienced leaders, including deputy and assistant heads, who aren't necessarily planning to take on a headship role as their next immediate step.

The key programmes in this area are:

- **Established Leader Programme** – aimed at assistant and deputy headteachers and, depending on context, other experienced school leaders who are not currently seeking headship, but wish to enhance their leadership skills.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/establishedleaders

- **Leadership Pathways** – a modularised programme that provides personalised leadership learning; it is designed to be flexible to suit an individual's contexts, needs and spheres of influence.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershippathways

Leadership Development Framework – Entry to Headship

This stage is for those aspiring to headship, as well as for newly appointed first-time headteachers.

The key programmes in this area are:

- **National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)** – from 1 April 2009 it will be mandatory to have completed NPQH prior to appointment to a first headship.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/npqh

- **National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL)** – the first national programme to address the needs of leaders within multi-agency, early years settings.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/npqicl

- **Trainee Headteacher Programme** – offers professional development for current deputies; it involves participants taking up a one-year internship in a school in a challenging context.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/traineeheads

- **Early Headship Provision** – for all newly appointed, first-time headteachers and acting headteachers.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/ehp

- **New Visions** – a year-long personal and professional development programme for all new headteachers.

More at: www.ncsl.org.uk/newvisions

NCSL development also provides strategic programmes. These include programmes geared to particular aspects of leadership, eg School Business Management or Strategic Leadership of ICT (SLICT), as well as those for teams of leaders. A full list of development opportunities is provided in the NCSL prospectus.

NCSL also facilitates development in less formal ways. Its Leadership Network is organised on a regional basis and, through events and online tools, enables leaders to discuss policy and practical issues.

Further information

Overview of NCSL Leadership Development Framework

www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes

NCSL prospectus with details of all programmes

www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

NCSL Leadership Network

www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork

Professional associations and other national and regional providers also offer a range of leadership development opportunities.

Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) offers provision for aspirant heads and, in partnership with NCSL, a Developing Leaders for Tomorrow programme aimed at developing leadership capacity in primary schools.

Local level

Most local authorities and dioceses support leadership development with locally developed and run programmes, often based around NCSL frameworks. These can provide both formal and informal development opportunities.

Provision varies from one authority to another, and you will have to check what is available to you locally.

Remember, too, that leadership development and succession planning for headship are priorities nationally. These issues are high on the local authority and diocesan agendas, so if provision is limited locally, or does not meet your needs, you may be able to work with your headteacher and others to prompt your local authority to develop its support for aspirant leaders in the authority area.

Examples of local authority programmes

Buckinghamshire Local Authority offers a one-day course, in conjunction with a local university, for primary school subject leaders, key stage and curriculum co-ordinators and deputy headteachers. Topics covered include: vision and values, teams and teambuilding, leadership styles, motivating colleagues and school improvement planning.

In **Warwickshire** a mentoring programme works on an informal buddy system. This is arranged locally and, unlike formal mentors, buddies are often colleagues from local schools. In other local authorities, school link advisers act as brokers for mentoring practices across schools within the authority, facilitating mentor pairings and quality assuring the process.

In **Wiltshire**, a 20-hour course – 'the manager in the middle' – is offered. The course is popular and well regarded and has accreditation options with a local university. In **Sheffield and Rotherham**, meanwhile, a programme for middle managers is provided through Sheffield Hallam University, making use of a variety of teaching and learning methods, including face-to-face teaching, learning sets, online support and mentoring. Senior staff are trained to run learning sets and to act as mentors to others in their schools.

Full details of these and other examples are included in NCSL's publication *LEAding Provision* available from

www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

School level

Effective development can take place just as easily at your own school level, ideally as a consequence of an effective approach to appraisal. Indeed, the performance management process gives you an excellent focus for school-based development activity, helping you to target effort to specific development outcomes.

Activity commonly takes place across school boundaries, for example with neighbouring and partner schools. In all likelihood you will have experienced these types of activities already.

Example of in-school development activities

Integrating coaching, mentoring and performance management

Sweyne Park Secondary School has developed a database of staff expertise that is used to support staff who wish to develop a skill or practice. Through mentoring sessions, staff are encouraged to observe a colleague who has been identified as having skills in a particular subject or teaching strategy. Staff feel comfortable about being observed and discussing aspects of their practice where they have identified a problem or where coaching support has been offered.

More details can be found in NCSL's publication *Leading Coaching in Schools* at:

www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

Middle leader development via networks

The Stockport Primary Schools Success through Learning Network Learning Community gave middle leaders responsibility as lead innovators to inspire, develop, implement and share innovative practices across the network. They led innovation within their own schools and also coached colleagues in networked schools. As well as supporting adult learning and development across the network they also took responsibility for project groups, gaining leadership experience they wouldn't otherwise have had.

More details can be found in Issue 4 of *Nexus*:

www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus

Cross-school learning community

The Walsall/Coventry Consortium Network Learning Community was based on six secondary schools in challenging circumstances. It had co-leaders who were neither heads nor senior leaders but who were given responsibility to set objectives and learning outcomes, motivate and develop group members and manage the budget.

More details can be found in Issue 4 of Nexus:

www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus

Building a career portfolio with a purpose

Your development plan is a means towards an end, not an end in itself. As a busy professional with some leadership responsibility already, your time is a precious resource, so it's important that you make it count.

That means development activities must deliver a practical benefit, enabling you to build your leadership skills and abilities.

Some development activity can have a tactical benefit too, which will help you negotiate recruitment processes and enable you to take your next career step. Activities that widen your network, for example, can bring you into contact with a wider range of organisations, some of whom may be future potential employers. Activities organised at local authority level can give you exposure to a wider audience than usual, especially to individuals within the authority itself who may one day be contributing to a reference to support your future application. A positive profile now can only help you in the future.

All of your experience – developmental and otherwise – adds up to create your own portfolio of career achievements. This is the collection of your specific achievements and experiences that demonstrates your ability to a potential future employer. Once you enter into the recruitment market, these achievements are the flags you will wave during recruitment processes to signal your ability.

If your development planning is on target, you will start a future recruitment process armed with the right collection of flags.

The next section of this guide looks at how you present your portfolio to best advantage, helping you to take your next step towards headship.

What next for you?

- Are you making best use of existing tools and frameworks to support your career plan? Is career planning an explicit part of your performance management process in school? Are you capturing your experience and achievements in a “professional portfolio” or some other document? Do you know what programmes are available to you locally and nationally to help you move forward?
- Audit your personal network of professional relationships. Do you have the range and quality of relationships which might help you make your next career move? What specific actions can you take in the next three months to build or consolidate your network?
- In terms of your career plan, do you have any fixed objectives? For example, are you limited geographically, or have you defined the type of school you want to lead? Are these really fixed objectives?
- Are you planning with an open mind? Is your plan based on accurate assumptions or perceptions - either about your own skills or the demands of school leadership. ? Can you test your assumptions with a critical friend, ideally with headteacher experience? Is your plan responsive to changing patterns of school leadership?

Section 3:

Understanding the recruitment market

Introduction

This section starts from the assumption that you have the skills and experience to take on a headship and, just as importantly, that you have the ambition and desire to take on a new role.

This section is for you if, deep down, you know you are ready. It looks at how you persuade a selection panel to agree that you are ready, whether you are just about to embark on your first foray into headship interviews or have already been active in the recruitment market.

The section looks at the headteacher recruitment process from a candidate's perspective. What should you expect, and how best can you prepare?

Hopefully, the principle messages contained in this guide are unlikely to surprise you. If you take them to heart, however, they should challenge you. Think of this like the challenge to adopt a healthier lifestyle. You know what you should and shouldn't eat and drink, and that you should exercise more. Lack of knowledge isn't usually a problem. The challenge lies in applying that knowledge to change your behaviour.

This guide approaches the recruitment process in the same way. Information is important, but it is only the foundation, useless without the attitude and mindset to win through.

That's why this section of the guide is for people who want to be headteachers. That is the starting point. It is for people who have the enthusiasm and belief that they can make a difference and the desire to take on a role that 9 out of 10 serving headteachers describe as deeply rewarding.

Focus and preparation

If you have already been through an interview for headship, you will know just how much time and energy it takes. It is a significant investment.

The process of application can be time-consuming in itself, eating into your personal and family time. If you get to interview, that part of the process can take you out of school for two days, as well as being physically exhausting.

So committing proper time to preparation is not just about being sensible – it is a focused tactic that is used to maximise the chances of getting a return on your investment.

It is also about the management of your personal reputation. Even if your application is unsuccessful, it will come into contact with a large number of people, including those at local authority or diocesan level who may be involved in other recruitment processes in the future. Even if they judge that a specific job is not right for you, it cannot harm you for them to take away a positive impression from your application.

Dynamics of the headteacher recruitment market

Effective recruitment is about two-way marketing. Schools are marketing opportunities to potential candidates; individuals are marketing themselves to schools.

So it helps to understand what kind of market you are entering.

In 2005/06, over 2,600 schools advertised for a headteacher. Around three-quarters of the secondary schools were successful in making an appointment at the first attempt. For the primary schools, the figure was about two-thirds.

As might be expected, the market is highly seasonal, with evidence that recruitment activity is becoming even more concentrated into just a few weeks of the year. The most concentrated burst of activity happens in the first half of the spring term. In 2005/06, over a third of headteacher posts went to an initial advert during January and February. So timing your preparatory work is key.

While advertisements for some posts attract many applications, the average number of applications for each post is surprisingly low. Numbers of applications are falling for primary headships, although they seem to have stabilised for secondary headships. Tables 1 and 2 are drawn from the annual survey commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), which was carried out for 2005/06 by Education Data Surveys. The tables show the activity levels associated with an average headship recruitment.

What does this mean? It means that, with the right application, pitched in the right way, the odds of managing to get to interview are good.

Table 1: Primary schools: response to advertising campaigns

	Average number of requests for application forms	Average number of applications submitted	Average number of candidates short-listed	Average number of candidates interviewed
2004	13.4	6.0	3.1	3.1
2005	12.3	5.4	3.2	2.8
2006	11.2	4.8	3.1	2.8

Source: Education Data Surveys, 2004–2006

Table 2: Secondary schools: response to advertising campaigns

	Average number of requests for application forms	Average number of applications submitted	Average number of candidates short-listed	Average number of candidates interviewed
2004	42	15.3	5.6	4.8
2005	40	12.8	5.0	4.4
2006	40	16.0	5.6	4.9

Source: Education Data Surveys, 2004–2006

Where does the market operate?

All headteacher posts must be advertised openly. In media terms, the recruitment advertising market is dominated nationally by the Times Education Supplement (TES), which carries school leadership adverts in both its printed and online versions. Other online jobsites also carry advertisements for headteachers posts.

The most significant media are:

- www.tes.co.uk
- www.e-teach.com
- www.guardian.co.uk
- www.education-jobs.co.uk

Local authorities and dioceses also produce in-house bulletins.

A few headteacher posts are managed by headhunting consultancies. Although these are a minority of posts, the key consultancies can be a useful addition to your network. Watch the TES to spot the names of the main consultancies on adverts. Most will welcome informal approaches to talk about potential future job opportunities.

Building your proposition

If you think of recruitment as an exercise in marketing yourself, the process would start by defining your proposition. What particular experience do you have that could add value to another school? How is that different to that of other candidates?

Don't go anywhere near a job application form until you have thought this through. You might be applying for the wrong jobs.

What does an effective proposition look like?

Well, it's not woolly and vague sentiments about being a committed professional – not because that is unimportant, but because (frankly) a governing body shouldn't look twice at you if you weren't.

Effective propositions set out your key selling points. They distinguish you from others and are backed by clear evidence. They offer proof of your experience and a vision of your potential. They help governing bodies define what kind of headteacher you might be, and how you might make a difference.

Some examples are:

- special experience in curriculum development, with evidence of having driven innovative approaches in your current school (with outcomes).
- special experience of school turnarounds, driving improvement in weak schools, with measurable evidence of your achievements.
- experience of new school structures (eg federation, collaboratives etc) or extended schools.
- particular experience of capital developments, such as Building Schools for the Future (BSF) or Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects, which could be of value to some schools.
- expertise in the inclusion agenda, backed by specific outcomes and achievements.
- inner city experience, or, alternatively, a track record in rural settings.

To be convincing, propositions are backed by a track record and evidence of achievement. Strong candidates are able to sum up concisely what they have done and – more importantly – what outcomes were achieved.

Where you can offer some form of objective assessment as evidence of your achievement, so much the better. Sometimes performance data can be useful. Figures can convey messages quickly and easily, and give readers confidence that you have been involved in making a measurable difference.

In other cases, achievements cannot be described in numerical terms. In these cases try to offer external validation of achievement. In effect you are saying: “Don’t take my word for it, others have recognised my/our achievements too.” External validation can take many forms: awards, inspection reports, being used as a local authority pilot or exemplar, personal appraisals, and parent and/or student feedback. They give employers confidence that what you are saying is real and can be evidenced.

A great proposition does more than demonstrate your relevant experience, however, it also shows that you have the potential to make an even greater difference in the future.

Matching your proposition to the market

Even when you have defined your key selling points – and pulled together the evidence to demonstrate them – there is one more key step. You must determine where your proposition has value.

Put crudely, you are looking for schools that are buying the type of skills you are selling. These are the schools that are most likely to recognise your potential to make a difference.

If you have genuine clarity about what you offer, it’s much easier to select those schools where your application is likely to be a good fit against their requirements. That forms your target market. Those schools are also more likely to be those where the personal and cultural fit is stronger and where you will feel comfortable professionally.

Equally, by being clear about your targets, you are less likely to waste time on applications where your chances of interview are low.

Even once you have identified a specific post in a specific school, there is work to do to refine your proposition, ie prioritising your experience according to a particular school’s requirements. This means you must take time to understand the school and its context.

So your proposition to a school comes in three parts:

1. What you know – your particular experience which adds value to a school and differentiates you from others.
2. What you’ve actually achieved – the validated outcomes that give your experience substance.
3. How your experience relates to a new school, ie how you would apply your knowledge and potential to add value as headteacher.

And that’s what should lie at the heart of any good application.

What next for you?

- Deep down, do you feel you are ready for headship? If you know you are, can you articulate your passion clearly and concisely in an interview setting? If you have self doubts (which are a natural part of reflective practice) how will you settle them so that you do not transmit lack of confidence at interview?
- What is your proposition for headship? How will you add value as a headteacher? Can you articulate your proposition clearly, and provide evidence to support your achievements?
- Is your development plan aligned to the seasonality of the recruitment market?

Section 4:

Getting the job

Introduction

This section looks at the headship recruitment process from a candidate's perspective. It steps through the key stages of the process in the order you are likely to encounter them, from completing an initial application to meeting the governors face to face at interview.

In October 2006, NCSL issued comprehensive guidance for governing bodies on the process of recruiting a new headteacher.

Download it from www.ncsl.org.uk/recruitingleaders. It will give you an insight into the minds of the selectors you will be facing.

Applications

Most recruitment processes start with an application form. Indeed, the Safer Recruitment initiative driven by the DfES and NCSL to promote child protection recommends that governors use application forms, discouraging application by CV.

However, whatever format governors set for the initial application process, your objective as a candidate is the same: to book your ticket for an interview.

Jobs are won (and lost) at interview stage. The application process is just the opening shot of your marketing campaign. An application must do enough to give governors sufficient evidence to want to find out more at interview, but not be so cluttered with irrelevant information that they miss your core proposition.

Think of an effective advertising campaign for a product or service. It establishes enough common ground to put you in buying-mood; perhaps it even engages you on an emotional level, but your decision to purchase will be based on more detailed information subsequently. So with an application you are saying: "This is why you should interview me," not necessarily, "This is why you should employ me".

Context is king

The best applications stand out because they do one thing well above all others: all of their content is aligned to the particular context of the school concerned.

- Personal experience is linked to the school's future challenges.
- Achievements are linked to the person specification for the job and resonate with the school's wider agenda.
- Personal statements reflect an understanding of the school's current situation.

These applications help governors to see how a candidate will add value to their school. They also stand out from 'Identi-kit' applications, which might demonstrate competence to be a headteacher in a school, but not necessarily that school. Governors want candidates who want their job, not any job. It's not an unreasonable objective.

Researching jobs and schools

Time is valuable, so only commit effort to the right applications. That means researching jobs thoroughly before applying, in order to check that the school concerned is worth your interest, as well as to gather the information required to put in a great application.

This is not complicated. Start with the job information pack that is available from the school. Don't expect too much, though. NCSL research showed that three-quarters of packs failed to provide candidates with the information they wanted. So be prepared to chase – ideally for the self-evaluation form, school improvement plan and financial information.

From the internet, you can see the latest Ofsted report, achievement data (available on the DfES website) and the demographic profile on the local authority website. Candidates often seek soft intelligence too, from colleagues, local authority advisers, school improvement partners or professional association networks.

And if all that stacks up, visit. Does the reality match the research profile?

Colleagues say ...

"I drove round the area and got a feel for the community. I talked to people in local shops about the school. It was very informal but helped me decide to apply."

A clear proposition, clearly presented

At the heart of every strong application is a clear proposition: what you know, what you've achieved, how it can make a difference here.

Knowing exactly what value you add is one thing: expressing it clearly within the constraints of an application process can be something else.

Everyone has their own particular style, and where application forms are used, different formats ask for information in different ways. Whatever the variations, however, some general rules hold true.

- Use examples of actual achievements to illustrate broader points (eg a specific example of how you've used workforce reforms imaginatively as evidence of your ability to manage resources).
- Focus on recent achievements. Experience in the last two years is usually seen as the most important and relevant.
- Make conscious decisions about the use of professional terminology. You need to show you are up to date without losing your audience, who see it only as educational jargon.
- Less can be more.

Passion helps

Let's be honest. Some standard application forms for headship have the effect of squeezing the human being out of the process. Candidates' experience is chopped up across half a dozen (or so) response boxes, making it difficult to get a view of an individual as a whole. In the rush to demonstrate professional competency, the person gets left out.

To differentiate your application demonstrate your potential by looking for ways to project something of your personal commitment into a role. Even the most rigid of application forms give you some space for personal statements or additional information. These can be useful spaces to develop a flow of ideas that summarise your experience and connect it with the challenge of the school in question. It need not (indeed, should not) be long. A pithy, well-targeted statement here can be worth pages of unfocused prose.

If there is no space for additional information, you could enclose a covering letter.

Evidence of some energy and enthusiasm can lift an application above others, but it is often about a subtle shift in tone.

Above all, it must be focused on the school in question. It's good that you might be 'a committed professional, passionate about widening opportunity' – but shouldn't governors be able to expect that as a baseline? It's better that you 'can see the challenges ahead to raise standards at XYZ school. I bring particular experience in this area, and would relish the chance to work with you to make sure all our young people get the best start.'

Governor reaction

“I suppose it was to be expected that the statements would be full of jargon and clichés, given how that sort of language dominates educational discourse these days, but what was sad was how uninspiring most of them were.”

Five characteristics of effective covering letters

1. They start with core credentials that qualify you for the job. In effect, this part says ‘You should take me seriously because ...’
2. They provide objective measures of achievement – measurable outcomes or external validation of success.
3. They match experience to the school’s specific challenges.
4. They have pace and energy and give a sense of a person with potential.
5. They are easy to read, concise and legible. Direct mail advertisers work on the basis that they have up to 8 seconds (or 15 words) to capture initial attention. Job applications are a different medium, of course, but the need for sharp writing remains the same.

These core principles can also be adapted to apply to personal statements on application forms.

Career history

The backbone of any application is your career history.

Good forms give you space to present your career history clearly, though if you feel the form is restrictive, you can include your CV in addition.

In any event, the basic rules for presenting your career history on a form are the same as for CVs.

Presenting your career history

Candidates agonise about how best to present their career history. It is a subjective issue which is an art rather than a science, but career histories – like CVs - must always be relevant, well written and easy to look at.

Relevant

- The way you present your career history on each application form should never be “standard”. It should be tailored to the specific application. The achievements you choose to highlight under each role should reflect the priorities of the job for which you are applying. If you are enclosing a CV in addition to a form, the same is true. Never use a “standard” CV.
- Research in Australia showed that the more competency statements a CV contained, the more likely a candidate would be shortlisted. This is a useful pointer to bear in mind when completing forms too.

Well written

- Some research into CVs suggests that they may be read initially in as little as 30 seconds. So whether you are completing a form or a CV, your writing must be sharp.
- The most important pieces of information are your current job title and experience in the last two years.

Easy to look at

- This is not the moment to get “creative” with font styles. Evidence shows that typefaces Arial and Times New Roman are easier to read. Don't think reducing font size below 10 point means your career history or personal statement will look more concise. They will just be illegible.
- Plenty of white space is a proven design principle. Margins of 2.5cm. No clutter.
- If you are adding a CV in addition to the application form, use white or ivory paper, single sided.

Don't give away excuses for selection panels to reject your application

It almost seems too obvious to mention, but things such as spelling mistakes and typographical errors can sink an application. In truth, such mistakes can slip past the best of people. It happens. Such errors usually bear little relation to a candidate's capabilities for the job, but they give governing bodies a reason to say no.

So check, check and check again. Don't give anyone easy excuses to reject your application.

Further information

Helpful information on the headteacher recruitment process can be found on the following websites.

- NCSL Guidance for prospective headteachers on the recruitment process.

www.ncsl.org.uk/media/1DE/27/guidance-on-application.doc

- NCSL Guidance on applying for your first headship.

www.ncsl.org.uk/managing_your_school/classof/Applyingfirstheadship.cfm

- Schoolzone advice on submitting a good application.

www.schoolzone.co.uk/resources/articles/Career/Career_Path/Guide%20to/Submit_Application_Part%201.asp

- Businessballs advice on CV writing.

www.businessballs.com/curriculum.htm

- When you are preparing for the interview: advice from Redgoldfish.

www.redgoldfish.co.uk/cvinfo/preparefor.asp

- Nuts and Bolts of Effective Cover Letters: Jobskills information online.

www.jobskills.info/career/cover-letters.htm

Bookshops also have numerous titles. Consider:

Bright, J & Earl, J, 2005, Brilliant CV, 2nd ed, Harlow, Pearson

Faust, B & Faust, M, 2006, Pitch Yourself, 2nd ed, Harlow, Pearson

The selection process

The initial paper application is about demonstrating what you've achieved and how this relates to a new school. When you get to interview, it is also about you as a person. This is where recruitment processes get personal.

How well do you engage with interviewers? Critically, how does your personal leadership and communication style fit with governors' aspirations for the future?

Of course, there are some practical interview techniques you can practise that can help you be more effective. But, as a senior leader, you will already have had many interviews, so the basic technique should be familiar.

However, to win at this level, you need more than good technique.

Colleagues say ...

“Headteacher interviews are very different to deputy head interviews. With headship interviews, they want to know how you will put it all together: what’s your vision?”

In headship interviews, your personal leadership qualities will be under scrutiny to a much greater extent than in previous recruitment processes. To shine, your attitude and mindset will be just as important as your technical competence.

The right mindset

If you don’t think you can do the job, don’t go to the interview. If you do think you can do the job, then your behaviour must demonstrate this. There is no middle ground.

The logic is straightforward. If you don’t demonstrate confidence in your ability to make a difference in a school, why should governors have confidence in you? After all, they are making what will probably be their single most important decision as a governing body. It’s not unreasonable to expect that they might be worried about making the wrong decision and be a little risk averse as a consequence.

As a short-listed candidate, you start with important psychological advantages.

First, you have been short-listed. Your application must have connected with the governing body on some level. You are already ahead.

Second, governors desperately want you to succeed at interview. They start each interview wanting the candidate in front of them to be the solution to the problem of finding a new headteacher. No selection panel starts out with the aim of not making an appointment. So your job as a candidate is to make sure the panel has no reason not to appoint you.

In short, governors have got to believe that you are their next headteacher. And this is where the right mindset is key.

Colleagues say ...

“You need to take governors on a journey – what will their school look like under your leadership?”

From the first moment you set foot over the threshold of a school to begin an interview and selection process, your outlook and behaviour must be those of a prospective headteacher – not an aspirant deputy, but a head-in-waiting. At every stage of the selection process, during both formal and informal moments, governors must see you as their next headteacher.

This doesn't mean that you won't have development needs, or gaps in your knowledge to fill, but it does mean that you will demonstrate the outlook and behaviour of someone who is already at headship level.

Navigating the selection process

The final interview and selection process for headteacher appointments is usually between one and three days. In 2005/06, the average length of the final assessment process was 1.5 days for primary schools and 2.2 days for secondaries.

It can all feel like something of an assault course, which is another reason for only pursuing those headships that meet your key criteria for your next job.

Colleagues say ...

“With every test or exercise you're being asked to do, take time to think about what is being tested. Are they looking for proof that you can prioritise or problem solve, or something else in particular?”

Selection activities vary widely. If you haven't experienced them before, you can get a good idea of what you might expect by looking at the NCSL guidance to governing bodies on appointing new headteachers. The guidance describes in detail the mechanics of the whole recruitment process, which can be as useful an insight to potential candidates as it is to governing bodies.

Below are the selection activities described in the NCSL guidance, with some key points from a candidate's perspective. Indeed, you may have practised some of these during the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

Presentations

These almost always figure at some point in a selection process, either on topics given in advance or provided on the day with a fixed time to prepare.

Content is important, of course, but panels usually remember more about how you present. Your communication skills are on the line. It's not usually a time for complex analysis. You need to show clarity of thought, expression, strategic thinking and conviction.

Governor reaction

“In our naivety, we assumed that, if they had reached deputy head level, our candidates would all have certain presentation skills. How wrong we were.”

Panel interviews

This is an extremely popular option because it enables a wider group of stakeholders to play a role in the selection process. You are put through a series of mini-interviews with small panels, each exploring a particular aspect of the role. Examples might be teaching and learning, financial management etc.

There is often a challenge of stamina. You need to hit the ground running and maintain a consistent pace. You can't afford to take the first panel to warm up before hitting your stride, or to fade away by the time of the fourth or fifth panel.

Don't be afraid to repeat yourself seemingly endlessly – each panel is different.

Lead an assembly

Sometimes candidates are asked to take an assembly as an indication of their ability to build up a rapport with students. It's logistically tricky, so less popular as a selection tool.

As selection tools, these are difficult for panels to assess, and (most of the time) it is difficult for candidates to excel in such an artificial environment. Don't try anything too risky. If you are unsure, it might be best to play safe.

Teaching

You might be asked to observe and comment on a lesson, or even to lead part of one.

This will be more familiar territory as it was probably part of the interview process for your current role. The difference is that you are approaching it this time as a prospective headteacher, so your response may need to be wider. For example, if you observe excellent teaching and learning, your response as headteacher might also include some ideas for how to share that practice across the school system as a whole.

Student panels

Expect students to be involved in the selection process at some point, either as part of a student panel or perhaps an interview with the school council.

Governors often report how insightful the feedback from these panels can be, though it is not always clear how they build that feedback into their final decision. Again, this should be more familiar (but not necessarily easier) terrain. Engage as a prospective headteacher, not a candidate wannabe.

In-tray exercises and case studies

So-called in tray exercises ask you to prioritise a range of typical issues that may come across a headteacher's desk, and to indicate your response. Such exercises often focus on crisis management.

Written case study exercises focus on a specific scenario and ask you for a response or action plan. These might be designed to test data analysis skills (eg asking you for a response to an extract from school performance data) or written communications skills (eg asking you to map out your initial communications for students, parents and staff).

This is where your mindset as a prospective headteacher must guide you. With in-tray exercises, health and safety issues are a popular topic. Remember your accountabilities in this area, but remember too that effective heads delegate and use their whole team. In responding to specific scenarios in case study exercises, are there wider implications you should address (to demonstrate strategic thinking) as well as offering a response to the specific issue on which the exercise is based.

Group exercises

All the candidates are brought together and asked to discuss a topic together whilst being observed.

The actual discussion topic is usually irrelevant and it's the behaviour that counts. These assessments are as much about your active listening skills as your ability to contribute.

Colleagues say ...

"I'm a fairly quiet person. That was being misinterpreted as lacking assertive leadership ability, which isn't the same thing. I made sure I spoke up in interviews and made sure governors saw my assertive side too."

Simulations

You are asked to take on the headteacher role as part of a role play, sometimes with members of the panel. Scenarios usually focus on events such as meeting an angry parent or dealing with a difficult staffing matter.

There are no half measures here. You have no choice but to throw yourself into it, even if you hate role plays. Don't get blown about. Think about the messages that you want the assessors to take away and focus on that agenda.

Colleagues say ...

“Frankly, I thought some of the assessment exercises were silly. You’ve just got to be prepared for that.”

Formal interviews

This is the only part of a selection process you can be certain about. Although evidence suggests that formal interviews are not necessarily the most accurate way of determining the abilities of candidates, nonetheless they remain perhaps the most influential part of the process.

If you’ve got this far, then it’s all to play for. The next section looks at key interview techniques.

Further information

- Pitfalls awaiting candidates, as seen from the selection panel’s perspective (Education Guardian).

<http://educationguardian.co.uk/teachershortage/story/0,,1765203,00.html>

- The Tough Interview Questions: advice from Redgoldfish.

www.redgoldfish.co.uk/cvinfo/toughquestions.asp

Bookshops also have numerous titles. Consider:
Corfield, R, 2006, *Successful Interview Skills*, 4th ed, London, Kogan Page
Jay, R, 2005, *Brilliant Interview*, 2nd ed, Harlow, Pearson

Being effective at interview

This section looks at what differentiates a successful candidate in formal interviews for a leadership role.

It’s not an ABC of interview techniques. At this level, candidates have already come across the basics such as planning your journey to get there on time, speaking clearly, being concise etc. Signposts to checklists of basic advice are included in the ‘Further information’ box at the end of this section.

Instead, this section concentrates on key factors that, when all other things are equal, make the difference between success and failure in interviews for headship.

Credibility

Interviews are not just about what you know. They are about your credibility as a prospective headteacher. Put bluntly, can the governors imagine you leading their school? Do they believe that you can carry it off?

Credibility is established in many ways. Research conducted in the US in the 1970s suggested that credibility comes from a complex combination of factors. The research found that the content of what someone said contributed relatively little in establishing overall credibility. An individual's tone and style of speaking contributed much more, and visual stimuli contributed most.

So every aspect of your appearance and behaviour must be consistent with being the next headteacher, and almost as if you were in the post already.

Colleagues say ...

"I think a strong handshake, good eye contact, good posture, sensible questions, are all important. The decision to take you on may well be instinctive – interviewers tend to decide very quickly whether or not the person they're interviewing would be right. You need to give your interviewers something to react to, to have that instinctive response to."

Whether the panel acknowledges it consciously or not, they will absorb visual stimuli such as your dress, facial expression and body language.

Dress for business. This is not the moment to express a fun side with novelty socks or ties, for example.

Manage what your body is saying. Keep an open posture throughout. Put your hands in your lap and use sparing hand movements for particular emphasis. Concentrate on making eye contact across the whole panel. Give visual feedback to questioners by smiling or nodding appropriately.

Above all, you need to be consistent through each part of the recruitment process, including the times between assessment exercises, as well as during the interviews themselves.

Connection

A good interview will probe your experience and look for evidence that you can do what you say you can. An experienced, capable candidate could sail through those questions, and still not differentiate themselves from others.

By the time you get to the final interview stage, successful candidates are achieving connection with the panel. As well as demonstrating achievement (which, by definition, is backward looking), strong candidates are connecting their experience forward and discussing how they can make a difference in the new school. They are offering a vision of the future too.

Don't miss an opportunity to connect. For example, a common question format is: "Can you give us an example of when you have ..." to ask you to illustrate a specific competence.

Three-part answers can help turn a retrospective answer into an opportunity to link with the school:

- set out the example of achievement.
- demonstrate the outcome.
- apply the experience to the new school's challenges, showing how you could add value.

There are other ways to connect too. Formal interviews (and presentations) usually come at the end of a long selection process. They are a chance to demonstrate what you have picked up over the previous two days.

Colleagues say ...

“With your answers, you’re trying to relate to the interviewer, not just demonstrate knowledge.”

Know your audience

Governing bodies can make challenging interview panels from a candidate's perspective. Governors come from all walks of life. Some will know a great deal about the current education agenda, and some will not.

In addition, there will often be a representative from the local authority on the panel, who will also ask questions.

The potential diversity of your audience presents a challenge.

The interview may sometimes appear to lurch from one subject to another with little connection – the state of the toilets on one question to your view of personalised learning with the next. Be ready. Just roll with it.

You'll need to adapt your level continually. You need to show you are up with the policy agenda for some – so some jargon may be OK – but be more direct to keep others with you.

The bottom line is this: know who you are talking to. What does the chair of governors do for a living? What about the other panel members? What is the background of the local authority representative? If you know your audience, you are more likely to pitch what you say at the right level.

In any event, use questions as opportunities to tell stories as a way of engaging them. Your attitude towards, say, the development of personalised learning, may best be illustrated by an example of what you have actually done in your current role. It's a more accessible style of communication and has the added benefit of demonstrating that as well as understanding the issues, you can deliver.

Whatever else happens ...

... never criticise your current headteacher, current school or local authority. However justified you might feel, it always reflects badly. Governors want to know what is pulling you to their school, not what is pushing you out of your current school.

Four trip-wire questions – be ready

Candidates worry about difficult questions, but often it is the seemingly innocuous questions that are part of almost every interview that trip people up.

Here are four of the most common trip wires.

1. Any question that doesn't make sense

Not all the panel will be skilled interviewers, and sometimes questions might be confusing or unclear. In all likelihood, the rest of the panel didn't understand the question either. These are great opportunities to demonstrate your ability to manage an uncomfortable moment and show leadership. Take the questioner's side. Start by helping them to clarify what they'd like to know. Define the question you're going to answer yourself. When you've offered a view, check back to see if that answered the question.

2. "Why do you want this job?"

This is the open goal of interview questions. Candidates should launch the ball into the back of the net – but too often miss the goal entirely. The answer is not: "because I have achieved everything I can in my current role and it is time to look for a new one" or "because this job is much nearer home and I can reduce my commute"; or "because I have decided to start applying for headship this year after completing my NPQH." The answer should be specific to the school in question, linking your experience to its agenda, and be optimistic and forward-looking.

3. If you become headteacher, what percentage of [5 A–C grades or Level 4s] can we expect next year?

If you've looked at the figures and have a confident and reasoned view, then offer it. If not, don't get drawn and don't guess. Effective leaders set realistic goals based on sound evidence. Talk about the process you would use to set goals.

4. Are you still a firm candidate?

This is usually the last question of the interview. An astonishing number of candidates hesitate – and shoot themselves in the foot at the eleventh hour. By this stage, there should only be one answer to this question: "yes". If you are that unsure, you should have had a private conversation with the chair of governors before now – or not come to the interview. Hesitate, and you can be lost.

After it's all over

Once the interview and selection process is over, if you have been successful, your first task is to settle the terms of the job offer – your salary and conditions – so that a written offer can be made.

If you have specific salary aspirations that are above the minimum offer that governors are likely to make, you should have flagged this informally before now. Final negotiations over starting salary should not involve any surprises on either side. If you have expectations that would stretch the governors' budget, then take informal soundings early in the recruitment process. Otherwise, you could be putting yourself through a recruitment process that could never result in a positive outcome.

Not many candidates for headship find it easy to talk about money. If you think it could be an issue, however, it's better to have the conversation earlier rather than later, otherwise you might find yourself in a worse situation.

Post-recruitment actions

Whether you have been successful or not, there is a lot to be gained from a recruitment process.

Get feedback

You've given a lot – it is reasonable to expect something in return. Feedback is often offered to unsuccessful candidates, but seek it, too, even if you have been successful.

Set your own list of what you want to know. What gaps did the panel identify? Did they pick up your key selling points? Just listen. Don't debate – the recruitment process is over – just collect information.

Think network opportunity

Who did you meet in the course of the recruitment process that would be a useful addition to your network. especially local authority and diocesan representatives. At the very least, drop them an email to say you enjoyed meeting them. You never know when you might cross their path again.

Keep going

The headteacher recruitment process can be gruelling and exhausting. Even if you are unsuccessful initially, however, it should also be a learning experience.

Keep failure in perspective. Sometimes, recruitment processes just won't go well for you. Perhaps you have an off-day – it happens – or perhaps there is a candidate who has special local knowledge that just gives them an edge over you.

Sometimes your skills and experience just don't quite fit a particular school. In such cases, if governors judge that you are not right for them, then almost certainly, they are not right for you either.

Some recruitment processes will test your powers of resilience to the limit. Just learn, adapt and move on – but keep going.

What next for you

- Are you happy with the way you present your skills, experience and potential in a written format (for use on an application form)? If you have been through a recruitment exercise recently, what feedback did you get about your written application? Do you have a critical friend who can help you review your work?
- Do you know what to expect at a headship interview so that you can prepare? Have you looked at the NCSL guidance for governors to get an initial idea? Who might be able to brief you about the process?
- Have you got a plan for after the recruitment process, whatever the outcome, to get feedback and expand your network?

Finding, developing and keeping great headteachers

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