

FOR MANY years now I have been receiving application forms from nurses, some of which are inadequately completed even for senior positions. A person deciding to set up a company to assist nurses to complete application forms would make a small fortune overnight.

The purpose of my writing this month is to ask the question: "How can a nurse stand more than a reasonable chance of being shortlisted for a position in nursing?" The first rule is to have in one's possession sufficient information about the new job and the new organisation that one wants to join. This can only be obtained, of course, by writing and asking for it. If, when the information is received, not all the relevant facts are given, write asking for them. If there is no response, or the reply is inadequate, do not proceed with an application – no one would be happy for long in that type of organisation.

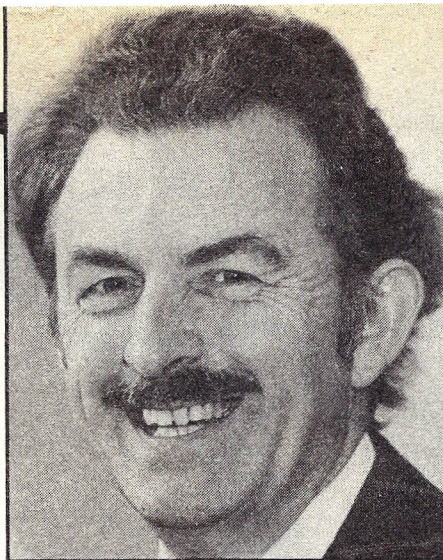
The second rule is, does the applicant have the necessary experience? Is the experience relevant to the position being advertised? The chances of being shortlisted, for instance, for a senior nursing officer's post when the highest post held to date is a staff nurse's is just about nil. Even when all the known information is at hand and the experience obtained is relevant, that by itself is insufficient for a prospective employer to shortlist.

A senior colleague told me recently that having advertised a senior post, over 200 applications were received. Many of the applicants qualified by qualification and experience. Although I admit that this response was exceptional, many posts attract up to 12 applications. Why should one be necessarily better than the others? Remember, most employers will only shortlist enough candidates that could comfortably be interviewed in half a day.

To be sure of detailed consideration, great attention should be given to completing the application form. Every question should be answered in the detail requested. A prospective candidate should never try to pretend to be what she is not. Do not put down anything on the application form that cannot be confirmed at interview. It may seem clever to some people to alter their date of birth, say, from 1923 to 1932, but someone on the committee is bound to calculate every date given by the applicant and have a series of difficult questions ready, so the error is soon found out and the job lost.

In the same way, gaps in service that are glossed over are often revealed by referees. To many readers these comments may seem surprising, but these things do happen. Also, remember that any senior nurse can work out roughly from the original GNC registration number the age of the applicant.

Next comes the section on general education. There are still many older nurses with a disadvantaged educational background. I would not personally include in this section any studies that had not resulted in taking and passing the necessary examinations. Putting down statements like:



A form of promotion

In his second article on climbing the hierarchy ladder, Anthony Carr, Area Nursing Officer for Newcastle upon Tyne, gives some useful tips on an obvious, but often neglected, procedure towards a top job – form filling.

"I have studied the following five subjects at O-level" when no examination was taken, only leads to embarrassment at interview for both sides. By all means mention these studies in the general section later.

If already holding a senior position at, say, senior nursing officer level at an early age, it may be of distinct advantage to display a rapid promotion career with a very average educational background. It produces a challenge to those other applicants with A-levels or several O-levels. Any assessor will match achievement in basic education with how it has been built on since that time, both in terms of professional development and positions held.

As a general guide, it is perhaps true to say that up to the age of 30, education and other professional qualifications do account for considerable consideration. After that age, experience and other related activities begin to count for more. Professional qualifications in nursing are, however, important, and in addition to listing them, mention should also be made in the general information section. Even when special attention has been given to these sections on the application form, all candidates may have done the same. It may be true that one or two have scored a few extra points for education or special experience in a particular situation.

What, then, can make a particular candidate's application far more attractive

than the many others? Some factors that can influence selection committees include membership of professional or trades union bodies, especially if a position of responsibility can be demonstrated. Membership of professional associations like the Royal Society of Health or British Institute of Management and other bodies, reveals a breadth of interest which is beyond that of the present position held.

This is one of the secrets of being different from the other applicants. If a candidate has had papers published, a properly typed list can be included with the application with benefit.

The last part of the application form is perhaps the most important of all. Nearly all health authorities invite candidates to add further information in support of their application. This is the opportunity to almost guarantee a committee wanting to interview a candidate. Yet, sadly, this is the section that is so often neglected. I have seen only recently just four lines submitted in this section by a candidate for one of the most senior posts in an authority. Many shortlisting committees reject otherwise reasonable applications at this stage of selection.

Their attitude is, understandably, that if a candidate cannot be bothered to complete this section satisfactorily, they in turn cannot be expected to show any further interest in the candidate. This is particularly true if there is a large number of applications. Often a candidate is invited to continue on a separate sheet if necessary, but many refuse the invitation. What greater invitation could there be than this?

Balance, of course, is essential at this stage. Some people copy out their job description. The committee becomes rather bored with this type of information, as one description looks very much like another. It should be remembered that all the rest of the application form is to do with how well prepared the candidate is in terms of professional training and experience. As yet they know nothing about the candidate as an individual.

Here, then, is the opportunity to relate the information already given to a real person. The committee should be able to use the personal information to see how the candidate would relate to the new job. Most committees feel more secure if they can visualise how certain candidates would fit into the new organisation. They should be told about personal interests; if one has a family, mention it. The whole aim should be to create interest in the candidate as an individual.

There is great personal interest and pleasure being a member of a selection panel, to know that a candidate has "got through" to you. This, more than anything else, assists most in shortlisting a candidate. I personally think this is fair. Holding a position in nursing, particularly at senior level, is more than having the right qualifications and having held the appropriate positions. It is having the ability to use that experience and communicate effectively to staff and patients □