Flow Chart

A flow chart is the pictorial representation of a process. There are standard symbols to designate certain items or actions in a process, although flow charts can be developed using unique symbols as well.

Use a flow chart to...

Show the complexity, problems, and redundancies of a process, where simplification may be necessary.

Compare the actual process to the ideal process, and determine where improvements can be made.

Illustrate and examine the individual activities that make up the process.

How to build a flow chart...

1. Clearly define the beginning (input) and the end (output) of the process.

2. Determine the level of detail that the flow chart should show. The chart can be at the macro level and show enough information to get a general understanding of the process, or it might show a greater level of detail by illustrating each decision point or action.

3. Determine the steps in the process.

4. Write the steps in the process, arranging them in the order in which they are carried out. Write the steps on Post-it notes and place them in the order in which they *actually* occur, rather than how they *should* occur.

5. Draw the flow chart using standard symbols, which indicate the parts of the process.

An oval is used to show materials, information, or action that starts the process (inputs) and the results (outputs) at the finish of the process.

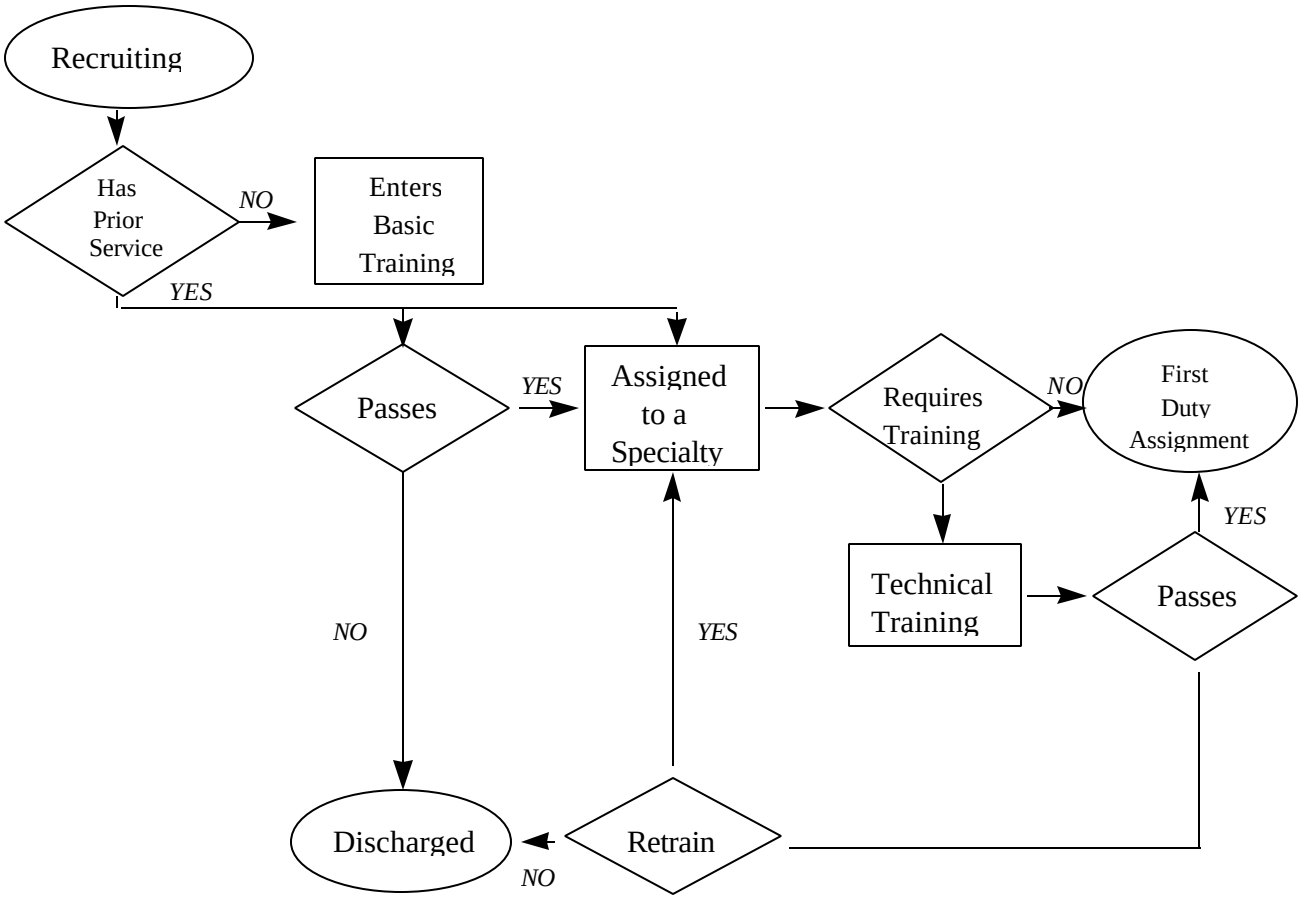
A rectangle is used to show a task or activity performed in the process. There may be several inputs into a task, but there is usually only one output.

A diamond shows a decision point in the process where there is a yes/no question being asked.

6. Draw arrows to show the direction of the process.

7. Make sure the flow chart is complete and correct. Are the steps of the process stated clearly? Is every feedback loop closed? In other words, does each path take you ahead or back to another step? If there is more than one arrow coming out of an activity box, there may be a need for another decision point (diamond).

8. Analyze the flow chart. Look for complexities and redundancies in the process. Are all outputs being used? Draw a flow chart of the ideal process, and compare it to the current process. Look for differences, and determine how they can be fixed.

An Example of a Flow Chart

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