https://www.go2hr.ca/articles/conducting-effective-reference-checks

Conducting Effective Reference Checks

Conducting reference checks can be one of the most important steps in the selection process. Since past performance is often the best indicator of future performance, references allow you to talk to past supervisors in order to determine if the applicant being considered is suited for the role.

Reference checking allows you to ensure that you are finding the most qualified person who is also a good match for the position. By conducting reference checks, you can avoid costs associated with failed probation periods and poor performance, which can impact your guests or clients and damage your image or reputation.

Why perform reference checks?

These checks help you confirm information on the candidate's application form and resumes. You will also gain greater insights into the candidate's skills, knowledge and abilities from someone who has actually observed the candidate perform.

It is important that during the interview process, you obtain consent from the applicant to contact their references and ask employment-related questions. A common mistake managers often make is asking candidates to choose their references. Instead, you should tell the candidates that you wish to speak to the people who actually supervised them. It is good practice to speak to two or three work-related references. If the candidates' current employers do not know they are seeking work elsewhere, then go to the previous employers.

Before making the calls, it is good practice to make a list of questions so that you are asking the same set of questions, giving you a consistent frame on which to base your decisions. All questions should be job-related and legal. You cannot ask questions during a reference check that you are prohibited from asking during an interview.

How to conduct reference checks

- Identify yourself, your title, organization name and tell them you are calling about a reference for a candidate you are considering
- Ask if now is a good time to talk or whether they would rather schedule a call at a later time
- Make sure they understand that you have the consent from the applicant and that all responses will remain confidential
- It is important to give a brief description of the role you are considering the applicant for, so that they can comment in context
- Give them time to answer your questions. Let them respond, and do not cut them off or put words in their mouth

While it is important to tailor reference check questions to your organization, the job and the applicant being considered, the following are some common examples of questions that can be asked:

1. In what capacity were you associated with the applicant, and since what date?
2. In what capacity was the applicant employed, and what were their job responsibilities and salary?
3. Was the applicant successful in fulfilling his or her duties?
4. What was it like to supervise the applicant?
5. Was the applicant a valuable member of the team?
6. What unique skill did the candidate bring to your organization?
7. What were their strengths?
8. What were their weaknesses or areas that needed improvement?
9. How would they describe this applicant's absenteeism record in relation to other employees?
10. Did you ever find it necessary to reprimand or discipline this person? If so, what were the circumstances?
11. Considering the job being applied for, do you think the applicant is suitable?
12. Why did they leave your employment?
13. Would you rehire the candidate; why or why not?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

This simple list of questions helps narrow down your list of top candidates in order to select the best person for the job, your organizations, your clients and your bottom line.

http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/plcy-pltq/guides/checking-verification/index-eng.htm

Overview

Of all the various assessment methods available to hiring managers, reference checks are one of the most productive and useful sources of information about an applicant's past performance or accomplishments. The reference checking process relies on the behavioural consistency principle: that the most reliable predictor of future behaviour, such as job performance, is past behaviour. In addition to selecting applicants with a history of strong performance, reference checking helps hiring managers identify and exclude applicants with a history of counterproductive workplace behaviours. Properly conducted reference checks help organizations *verify* qualifications and *predict* job success in order to select employees who are the 'right fit' for a position.

Based on a review of best practices, this Guide provides practical information about the key elements of the structured reference check that yield optimal results for the hiring organization. The Guide is comprised of six key sections:

1. **A structured approach to reference checking:** This section provides information on the structured approach to reference checking, including its benefits for hiring managers and legal issues such as prohibited topics and consent under the *Privacy Act*.
2. **Planning and preparation:** This section describes the initial steps of planning and preparing effectively for the reference check interview. Here you will find practical tips on developing a Reference Checking Form, situating the reference check in the overall appointment process, involving the applicant and selecting and preparing reference checkers and referees.
3. **Conducting the reference check interview:** Step-by-step instructions on conducting the reference check interview are provided.
4. **Evaluating the applicant:** This section provides tips on how to assess applicants and how to integrate the results across the various assessment methods used in the appointment process.
5. **Informal discussion and applicant feedback:** This section provides information on the informal discussion as it pertains to the structured reference check and outlines some tips on how to effectively facilitate a feedback discussion.
6. **Additional sources of information:** This section offers additional information sources and professional associations from which practitioners can obtain further information on current research and practices related to reference checks.

A clear distinction should also be made between the use of reference checks as a tool for verifying and assessing applicant qualifications, which is the object of this Guide, and the procedures needed to obtain a reliability status or security clearance as part of the Conditions of Employment. The latter process is conducted according to the Government Security Policy and is not discussed in this Guide. The principles presented here help hiring organizations in the federal public service to realize the full potential of the reference checking process and achieve meritorious appointments as defined by the PSEA.

1. A Structured Approach to Reference Checking

Why a structured reference check?

A structured reference check is a systematic evaluation of an applicant's past job performance, based on conversations with people who have worked with them. Like an employment interview, reference checking is most effective when it is well-structured and integrated thoughtfully into the hiring process. In contrast to an informal conversation, a well-structured reference check will yield useful information, increase the hiring manager's confidence in the results obtained and enhance the legal defensibility of the process. Several characteristics set structured reference checking apart from a casual conversation and make it a valuable assessment tool that is aligned with merit.

Structured reference checks are:

1. **Job-related.** The focus is on an applicant's ability to perform the job-essential and asset qualifications that are outlined in the Statement of Merit Criteria. Structuring the reference check around job-relevant criteria provides a more accurate prediction of future job performance.
2. **Based on an observation of work.** The information that is provided by a referee must be based on their own experience observing or working with the applicant. This personal experience enables a referee to comment on the consistency of the applicant's performance over time.

3. **Less prone to self-serving bias.** By offering a third-party perspective, structured reference checks are less influenced by inflated self-evaluations on the part of the applicant.
4. **Standardized.** The same set of questions are asked of all referees in a given appointment process. This consistency in approach helps to ensure that all applicants are treated equally and that comparable information is obtained for each applicant.
5. **Focussed on behaviours.** By focussing on job-related behaviours, the reference check process becomes more objective and errors in judgement are minimized. Asking probing questions and comparing information skilfully also help to ensure that the process produces more than a superficial evaluation.
6. **Legally defensible.** Given the enhanced accuracy, consistency and procedural rigour, a structured reference check is more likely to uphold the requirements of the PSEA, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and other relevant legislation than a more informal process.

What are the legal issues?

Privacy issue. The collection of personal information by a federal institution is subject to the *Privacy Act*. Under this Act, personal information is defined as information about an identifiable individual that is recorded in any form. In the context of a reference check, personal information includes the views or opinions of another individual about the person who is the object of the reference check. It is recommended that hiring officials exercise due diligence by obtaining consent from the applicant prior to contacting referees unless there is a reason not to do so.

Prohibited topics. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* defines prohibited grounds of discrimination. These grounds are: race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex (which includes pregnancy or childbirth), sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted. Accordingly, *reference check questions should avoid these areas directly and indirectly.*

Reference checkers should also limit their inquiries to job-related information. It is inappropriate to inquire about areas that are unrelated to actual job performance. These areas include questions related to: hobbies, social activities, political beliefs, residence, medical status, and any past legal actions including workers' compensation claims and safety complaints. Casual conversation can be particularly dangerous as it can easily stray into prohibited topics. Deviating from job-related topics can create the impression of an undisciplined process or that hiring will be based on issues that are not job-related. While there is no need to be artificially rigid, it is best for reference checkers not to stray from a businesslike focus on the task of reference checking.

Misconceptions. A common misconception is that discussing the job performance or behaviour of an employee is illegal. This view may cause referees to refuse to participate in a reference check or to provide only minimal information. Although legal challenges may arise from the reference checking process, they are usually the result of poor practices such as discussing prohibited topics. Below are a few general steps that hiring officials can take to enhance the legal defensibility of the reference check and obtain more useful information about the applicant:

- Ensure that all questions relate to the requirements of the job and to employee performance or conduct during their previous job(s);
- Encourage referees to provide evidence of job performance based on observable work behaviour; and
- Avoid questions on prohibited topics.

2. Planning and Preparation

An effective reference check requires some planning and preparation by HR practitioners and managers before the first referee is contacted. To create a reference check strategy for your next hiring decision, a number of important questions need to be addressed. For instance, what is the purpose of the reference check? What qualifications should be assessed? Who will conduct the reference checks? Who is an appropriate referee? These and other questions are addressed below.

What is the purpose of the reference check?

An essential first stage in the planning process is to clarify the purpose of the reference check. This clarification will determine both the type of information to collect and the process that will be used to collect it.
The information that is gathered from reference checks can serve four main purposes:

- Verifying the accuracy of the information that is provided by job applicants on other assessment methods such as application forms, interviews and résumés;
- Assessing some of the qualifications from the Statement of Merit Criteria in order to predict applicant success on the job;

- Uncovering patterns of desirable or counterproductive behaviour in an applicant's work history; and
- Identifying the developmental needs of applicants in order to determine appropriate training or developmental opportunities for a newly-hired employee.

What qualifications should be assessed by the reference check?
With limited time and resources to invest in an appointment process, hiring organizations will need to decide what qualifications will be assessed by the reference check. The following are some important questions for HR practitioners and managers to consider when deciding the type and number of qualifications to assess:

- Are there qualifications that are best evaluated over time (e.g., dealing with stress)?
- Can former supervisors/co-workers provide useful information about this qualification?
- Are there qualifications that are not assessed entirely by other means?
- If qualifications have been assessed by other means, do they require verification?

Taken from the Statement of Merit Criteria, the chosen qualifications typically include such things as training, education and experience as well as job-relevant competencies, which can include knowledge, skills, abilities and other personal characteristics. Each competency chosen for the reference check should be defined formally and include a number of measurable behaviours linked to that competency. Usually, managers will choose up to four behavioural indicators per competency assessed.

When should the reference check be conducted?
Reference checking is usually conducted in the final stages of an assessment process, after the applicant pool has been narrowed to a handful of individuals. Doing so at this stage enables hiring organizations to confirm the information provided from previous assessments and helps to minimize costs associated with the process. However, reference checks can also be done in the earlier stages of an appointment process. For instance, in some circumstances, it may be essential to do a pre-selection based on critical qualifications that are best assessed through the observation of behaviour over an extended period of time. A reference check allows one to collect such information efficiently. Ultimately, the available resources and the purpose of the reference check will determine its placement in the overall appointment process.

What should the Reference Checking Form include?
You are encouraged to develop a "Reference Checking Form" to keep the process structured and to obtain a written record of the information provided by the referee. This form should include accompanying instructions for the referee, a brief definition of the qualifications assessed, the questions developed for each qualification and any assessment scales used. In Appendix 1, you will find a template of a "Reference Checking Form", which can help you design your own form. The template is developed for the Assistant Deputy Minister level and will need to be tailored to the specific objectives of your reference check and the position and/or level for which it is designed.

What types of questions to ask?
When questioning referees about the competencies chosen previously, it is important to ask the same questions for each applicant. This consistency will achieve two goals. First, it will generate comparable information from each referee for an applicant. Second, it will help to ensure that all applicants are treated equally. Of course, referees vary in how they respond to questions; this will produce different conversations. By using probing questions, you may have to ask referees for clarification on the behavioural examples provided.

A Reference Checking Form is typically comprised of four main types of questions that are designed for different purposes. Depending on the purpose of the reference check, you can use one type of question or combine the different types.

Preliminary questions. The reference check typically begins with a series of open-ended questions to help the reference checker gain a clear understanding of the referee's working relationship with the applicant, as well as the applicant's strengths and areas for development. These questions also serve to increase the comfort level of the referee with the reference checking process, which is often an unfamiliar one.

Questions for verification. These questions serve to verify applicant information from other selection methods such as the application form, résumé and interview.

Competency-based questions. These questions ask referees to describe specific actions that the applicant has taken to demonstrate a series of job-relevant competencies. The reference checker's primary objective is to obtain facts, relevant incidents and behavioural examples from referees, rather than opinions or general statements about the applicant's ability in each competency area.

Questions about developmental needs. In order to bypass the reluctance sometimes expressed by referees to report unfavourable information about an applicant, questions on developmental needs can be asked. For example, "Are you aware of any areas that could be developed in relation to the competency?" might be asked. By emphasizing that "even the strongest applicants have improvement areas", referees are typically more comfortable providing statements in this area. Nonetheless, questioning about more sensitive information, such as potentially-inappropriate work-related behaviour, should occur later in the interview, once sufficient rapport has been reached between the referee and the reference checker.

Who should conduct the reference check interview?
Ideally, the reference check interview should be conducted by the hiring manager – the person who will be supervising the new employee and who is responsible for the appointment – or someone who has an intimate knowledge of the position being staffed. If conducting the reference check is assigned to HR personnel or an external consultant, they should be very familiar with the reference checking tools and the target position. Whenever possible, avoid assigning reference checking to less experienced employees. Adequate experience and specialized training in facilitating the reference check will help to ensure a valid evaluation.

What documents does the reference checker need?
In order for the reference check to make a meaningful contribution to the assessment process, the reference checker must have a sound understanding of the position to be filled and of the qualifications that are required. Accordingly, the following information should be provided to the reference checker prior to the interview:

- the Reference Checking Form;
- the job description;
- the definition of the competencies that are the object of the reference check; and
- any other relevant information.

In addition, the list of "Tips for the Reference Checker" provided in Appendix 2 offers some suggestions for reference checkers to consider while conducting the interview.

How should the reference check interview be conducted?
The reference check interview is usually conducted over the telephone but in some cases it may be practical to carry out the reference check in person. Although it is also possible to check references in writing, this practice is not recommended since written reference checks do not permit one to ask follow-up questions or to observe and record informative behaviours such as hesitations, inconsistencies or spontaneous remarks.

What is the applicant's role in the process?
Job applicants should play an active role in selecting and preparing referees for the interview. Depending on the needs of your organization, applicants can:

- select referees;
- provide the names of alternate referees;
- ensure that the referees have agreed to provide reference information and are available during the assessment process;
- ensure that accurate and current contact information is provided so that the referee can be reached easily;
- indicate the official language of preference of each referee on the list; and
- provide referees with copies of the résumé and job announcements and inform them of the hiring organization that will be conducting the interview.

Instructions that assist the applicant in selecting and preparing their referees should be outlined in a formal document and sent to the applicant prior to the reference checking interview and as early in the appointment process as possible. A sample set of instructions for applicants is provided in Appendix 3.

Who is an appropriate referee?

It is recommended that applicants choose their own referees based on guidelines such as those described in Appendix 3. Most importantly, the hiring organization should make it clear to applicants that referees must meet certain criteria in order for them to make a meaningful contribution to the appointment process. In particular, referees should:

- have had an adequate opportunity to observe the applicant in a variety of job-relevant situations so that they are able to provide constructive comments regarding the consistency and quality of the applicant's behaviour;
- have worked with the applicant recently and for a sufficient period of time; and
- be open and candid in communicating relevant information.

The most up-to-date, comprehensive information on the applicant's competencies will come from the referees with whom the applicant has worked the longest and the most recently. A common request is that applicants and referees have worked together for at least six months within the last five years. You may choose to modify this requirement in certain cases, such as when an applicant has not been in the workforce recently or at all.

It is good practice to contact at least two or three referees, preferably the following persons, in order of importance:

1. ***Recent immediate supervisors***. Supervisors have not only observed the applicant on the job, but have also evaluated the applicant's performance in a formal appraisal process and offered feedback for improvement. In most cases, they will have kept records of these performance evaluations. Supervisors have had the opportunity to observe the applicant perform in a number of different circumstances and develop over time. It is, therefore, good practice to *select recent supervisors as referees wherever possible*. Ideally, these supervisors will have observed the applicant in a position similar to the one being staffed.
Often, within the context of internal appointment processes, an applicant's immediate supervisor (who may be asked to serve as their referee) is also the hiring manager and a member of the assessment board. In these cases, it is vital to the integrity of the appointment process that when the immediate supervisor provides reference information, they adhere strictly to the behavioural indicators in their reference check comments. This focus reduces perceptions of personal favoritism or bias related to the appointment process.
2. ***Clients and co-workers***. Clients who have worked closely with the applicant can also offer valuable perspectives on qualifications that pertain to client relations. Co-workers can also be valuable sources of information if they have had the opportunity to observe the applicant over a sufficient period of time. To ensure objectivity of information provided by clients, colleagues or subordinates, it is important to keep the conversation focused on the behavioural indicators associated with the competency being assessed.

How to prepare the referees?

Adequate preparation by the referees will enhance the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the reference check. The reference checker should provide the following preparatory documents to referees as far in advance as possible for them to review:

- Instructions detailing what is expected of them (for sample instructions, see Appendix 4);
- The job advertisement (for an advertised position) or summary of responsibilities from the job description form (for a non-advertised position);
- The Statement of Merit Criteria; and
- The Reference Checking Form.

With competency-based reference checks, it is good practice to:

- Provide the referee with a definition of each competency and accompanying behavioural indicators, as well as any assessment scales.
- Encourage the referee to be prepared to provide concrete examples of how the applicant has demonstrated the relevant behaviours. Explain to the referee that it is not necessary to give an example for each and every behaviour listed for a particular competency. Instead, they could give one or two broad examples that integrate many, if not all, of the listed behaviours.
- Inform the referee that the reference check data are protected; however, the information obtained is not confidential, in that an applicant may see their reference check report if they request to do so.

Who should assess the competencies?

When a competency-based reference check is to be used, the manager in charge of the appointment process decides who will be responsible for assessing the applicant on the competencies chosen for the reference check. This decision should be based on who is most capable of assessing the applicant's performance according to the behavioural evidence provided and the job requirements. Individuals responsible for the assessment of reference check information ("the assessor") could include the referee, the reference checker, the hiring manager or the assessment board. Research differs on which is the best option. Although the referee has a greater understanding of the applicant's performance in a previous position, they may not have an adequate understanding of the target position or sufficient objectivity in evaluating the applicant's performance. A qualified reference checker, in contrast, is expected to have an understanding of the position and the required competencies in order to offer a neutral perspective and should be experienced in collecting behavioural evidence. On the other hand, the reference checker has not been in a position to observe the applicant in their previous position and would, therefore, base their ratings solely on the examples provided. Finally, the hiring manager or an assessment board could serve as assessors because they understand the position requirements and the organizational context. While they may not be as familiar as referees would be with the applicant's ongoing performance and must rely on the examples provided, they have an advantage that others do not - they are able to combine the reference check information with that obtained from other assessment tools. Comparing information across individual reference checks and with other assessments can confirm information provided by individual referees or from other tools and can reveal patterns of behaviour that would be missed, were each reference check to be assessed in isolation.

Since the assessment of competencies through a reference check will have a considerable influence on the overall assessment of the applicant, the hiring manager will need to ensure that the assessor is competent. No matter who is chosen as an assessor, the hiring manager should ensure that the assessor has a working knowledge of reference checking tools and best practices in order to judge the quality of the comments and examples obtained so that they can provide objective, evidence-based ratings for each competency assessed.

3. Conducting the Reference Check Interview

Generally, the reference check interview starts with a series of open-ended questions followed by questions designed to verify applicant qualifications, then a more in-depth competency assessment. The purpose of this section is to provide guidance related to each stage of the reference checking interview process. The section concludes with general tips to consider when conducting the interview.

Stage 1: Initiating the discussion

It is important to begin the interview by establishing a comfortable rapport with the referee and by ensuring that they understand the purpose, content and duration of the reference check. A sample introduction is provided below.

"Hello, my name is ________________and I am calling to conduct a structured reference check on_____________, who is being considered for the position of _______________. The reference check will include preliminary questions designed to verify certain employment information, followed by gathering information on the applicant against a series of job-related competencies. The reference check will take approximately one hour to complete. Is this a good time for you? If not, when would it be convenient for us to conduct the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?"

Following the introduction, confirm that the referee has received the necessary information listed in the preparation and planning section. Based on this information, provide a brief description of the duties and responsibilities of the target position before raising the points below.

Tell the referee that while they are responding to questions, you will be taking notes in order to ensure that their comments are consistent with the competency definitions. In this role, you may need to:

- ask for information to be repeated or clarified; and
- state that there may be some silent periods, but not to worry, as you are trying to write verbatim notes and are still attentive.

As a prelude to the interview, remind the referee that "since the information that you provide will help to determine the applicant's fit for the target position, we would appreciate your candor in responding to the questions." Also, encourage the referee to provide facts, concrete descriptions, relevant incidents and behavioural examples rather than opinions.

Dealing with refusals. Referees may be reluctant to provide information about a former employee. Consider the following steps to encourage their participation and enhance the quality and breadth of the information obtained:

- Remind the referee that the reference check is only one of several assessment tools that will be used to determine the most suitable applicant for the position.
- Inform the referee that the applicant has authorized the reference checking process.
- Explain to the referee that they will not be stating an official position for their organization.
- If, once you have stated the importance of the reference check, the referee continues to object, it is best not to insist further and simply make note of this fact in the file, while thanking the referee for their time. Then, contact the person responsible for the appointment so that you may discuss alternatives such as obtaining another name from the applicant.

Stage 2: Asking preliminary and verification questions
Once the discussion is initiated, ask the preliminary and verification questions included in the Reference Checking Form. These questions will allow you to obtain a clear understanding of the referee's working relationship with the applicant as well as an general overview of their strengths and areas for development.

Stage 3: Asking competency-based questions
Once the preliminary and verification questions have been covered, you may ask the referee to describe the performance of the applicant on each of the competencies being assessed by the reference check. In this case, a list of the competency definitions and behavioural indicators should be provided beforehand to the referee as part of the Reference Checking Form.

*Collecting behavioural evidence.*Begin the process by asking the referee to consider the behavioural indicators for a particular competency before asking them to provide examples of how the applicant has demonstrated these behaviours on the job. When collecting behavioural evidence, your primary responsibility is to take detailed notes and to ensure sufficient coverage of the behavioural indicators. In particular, you want to remind the referee to include:

- A description of the **situation**, **context** and **tasks** that the applicant faced;
- The applicant's **actions**; and
- The **impact** of the applicant's actions.

Additional probing may be required to obtain sufficient information. It is particularly helpful to ask: "Can you tell me more about that?", or, if the referee responds with a generalization or evaluation, "Can you give me a specific example?". If the referee refers to the actions of a group in which the applicant was involved, it would be advisable to ask, "What was the applicant's personal role in the events?" to obtain a more relevant response. Once comprehensive behavioural evidence has been obtained for a competency, ask the referee whether they are aware of any **"specific areas that could be developed by the applicant"** in relation to that competency.

Stage 4: Overall suitability
You may obtain information on the applicant's overall suitability for the target position by simply asking whether the referee would "appoint this person now as a _______". The referee should then explain their responses in order to provide a better indication of the applicant's 'fit' for the position. Information about the applicant's suitability for the position and organizational context may also be collected by asking "For what types of positions or organizations would the applicant be most suited?".

Stage 5: Additional comments from the referee
Ask the referee if there are any additional comments related to the applicant's job performance that they would like to add. You may also want to take a brief moment to review the reference check notes for unclear or insufficiently-detailed comments and, if necessary, ask the referee to clarify and/or elaborate on the information provided.

Stage 6: Closing the interview
You should conclude the interview by thanking the referee for their time and cooperation and asking for permission to call back with any additional questions.

Stage 7: Additional comments from the reference checker
At this stage, you may record any relevant observations about the reference check. These comments could include a description of any exceptional circumstances (e.g., the power went out during the reference check interview) or relevant aspects of the referee's knowledge of and/or relationship with the applicant. It might also include general

observations about the tone of the interview such as the referee's willingness to provide detailed examples. For example, "Despite probing, the referee was unable provide detailed examples".

Summary tips

Focus on job-relevant behaviours. Referees should be reminded to *provide concrete behavioural examples* that demonstrate the applicant's performance on a given competency.

Follow the structured interview format. If references are being checked for more than one applicant, make sure the same questions are asked about each one. As with any step in the recruitment and selection process, it is important to treat all applicants equitably. Of course, depending on the information gathered, it may be possible that additional probing questions may be required in some situations and not in others.

Ask probing questions. Effective probing is a necessary component of the interview because it helps to ensure that sufficient data is obtained and any ambiguities or inconsistencies related to the job are clarified. Often, a general probing question such as "Can you tell me more about that?" will produce the required additional information. Similarly, if the referee responds with a generalization or evaluation, ask "Can you give me a specific example?".

Take detailed notes. You should listen carefully to referees and keep detailed and comprehensive notes of their comments. These notes are critical to the reconstruction of the interview process and may be required to defend an employment decision based on the reference check. Below are a few tips for gathering thorough and accurate information from the referee:

- Your notes should be a record of what the referee said, as opposed to your inferences or judgements.
- Note any responses that appear ambiguous or evasive, unusually hesitant or overly negative or enthusiastic.
- Resist the tendency to assess the applicant while gathering information. Assessing the applicant during the reference check may detract from obtaining other valuable information.

4. Assessing the Applicant

The results obtained from reference checks should be evaluated carefully. The breadth of this assessment will vary depending on the purpose of the reference check. For instance, a reference check that is designed for verification purposes may only include an evaluation of responses to preliminary and verification questions to identify any discrepancies in the applicant's responses compared with those from other assessment methods. However, in a competency-based reference check, ratings are typically assigned based on a thorough examination of the behavioural evidence provided by the referee. The use of a rating scale enables a more accurate and fine-grained assessment of the applicant's 'fit' for the position and helps to minimize personal bias. Once the competency ratings have been given, the reference check evidence should be integrated across multiple referees and assessment methods to identify any common themes and discrepancies. This section offers guidance on conducting a competency-based assessment.

Assigning competency ratings

Competencies can be rated against a variety of scale types. The simplest scale provides only "meets/does not meet" choices. This type of scale is typically used when the appointment process does not require comparisons to be made among candidates, such as when only one candidate is being assessed for an acting appointment. Alternatively, the appointment process may require an expanded rating scale to make meaningful distinctions among applicants. Other types of scales include numerical, verbal or combined formats.

Whichever scale is applied, competency ratings should be based on the behavioural evidence collected for each competency. This assessment will require a thorough review of the competency definitions and behavioural indicators prior to assigning any ratings. Once the assessor is familiar with this information, competency ratings can be assigned according to the behavioural examples provided by the referee. To help inform their ratings, assessors should ask:

- How many of the behavioural indicators for the competency were evident?
- How were the behaviours demonstrated in the referee's examples in terms of complexity and what was the impact?
- Do the behavioural examples provided meet the performance expectations for the target position?
- How would the applicant's developmental areas affect their performance in the target position?

Ratings provided for each competency should be accompanied by a brief explanation why the rating was given, based on the behavioural evidence provided. For instance, the assessor may justify a rating by noting that "not all of the required behaviours for the position were demonstrated in the examples provided and these did not produce the desired outcome".

In order to assess applicants fairly, assessors need to use a common rating scale and scoring procedure for each completed reference check. This standardized approach improves the accuracy of judgements made by assessors and helps in later comparisons among applicants. Below is an example of a combined (verbal and numerical) rating scale that can be used:

"Given the information gathered, how did the applicant perform on this competency?"

1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**X**
Greatly below expectations	Below expectations	Met expectations	Exceeded expectations	Greatly exceeded expectations	Unable to observe

When assigning competency ratings using a rating scale, the assessor should compare the referee's description of the applicant's behaviour with the behavioural indicators provided. As these indicators are tailored to the requirements of the target position, these are the expectations that must be met for an applicant to receive a "3", or "met expectations". If the evidence is of greater quality and depth than what is described in the behavioural indicators, a rating of "4" or "5" may be given. Similarly, evidence that is of less quality and depth relative to the behavioural indictors would merit a rating of "2" or "1".

Unable to observe. If the referee has not had the opportunity to observe any of the behavioural indicators for a competency during their experience with the applicant, the assessor is asked to record a rating of "Unable to Observe" (denoted by an "X" on the rating scale). It is important to note the difference between a rating of "1" and "Unable to Observe", namely that a "1" is given when an applicant has had opportunities to demonstrate a given competency but did not do so in those circumstances, while "Unable to Observe" applies when the referee's contact with the applicant did not allow them to observe that aspect of the applicant's behaviour.

Tips for assessing competencies

Below are some tips for the assessor:

- Try not to place undue weight on isolated incidents. Rather, look for overall patterns in the evidence. Also, consider the possibility that the applicant's performance may have been influenced by situational factors.
- Consider the quality of the information provided, especially if you suspect that the referee is not being entirely frank, or if there is inconsistent information.
- Ensure that reference check information is weighted in the same way for all applicants.
- Contact additional referees if you are in doubt about an applicant's qualifications.
- Document the information that was gathered from your reference checks, including those reference check requests for which you obtained no information.

Assessment errors and personal bias

The PSC Assessment Policy requires deputy heads and their delegates to ensure that "the assessment is designed and implemented without bias, political influence or personal favoritism and does not create systemic barriers." Therefore, assessors must make every effort possible to minimize the potential for assessment errors and personal biases to influence their evaluation. Assessment errors occur when an assessor's evaluation is influenced by something other than the behavioural evidence provided by the referee. The following is a list of common assessment errors with suggestions on how to minimize these errors.

Leniency and stringency. This is the general tendency to assess applicants consistently high (leniency effect) or low (stringency effect). Assessors need to be aware that they might have a different understanding of the requirements of the job and the qualifications assessed, but also that they need to be fair in assessing applicants. The result is that the assessor consistently rates all applicants either higher or lower than warranted.

Central tendency. This tendency involves the use of only the middle points on the rating scale, while avoiding the extreme points. Assessors may be reluctant to rate applicants high or low and, therefore, end up rating all applicants as average.

"Halo" and "Horn" effects. Sometimes, assessors tend to allow one good ("halo") or bad ("horn") characteristic or qualification to influence the evaluation of all other qualifications of an applicant. Assessors need to be aware that they might be so impressed by an applicant on one qualification that they may falsely attribute positive qualities for all other criteria regardless of the evidence provided. Conversely, when an applicant does poorly in one area, they may be under-rated in other areas assessed.

Fatigue. This is the tendency for assessors, as they become fatigued during a lengthy assessment process, to become less consistent or less vigilant in their application of the assessment criteria.

Stereotypes. At times, an assessor's own personal biases and preconceptions of a good employee can influence the evaluation. Stereotyping is often based on demographics such as sex, race, ethnicity or age, but can also involve other variables such as degree of education, politics or interests. Assessors must be aware that their personal beliefs and perceptions of what is needed for the job may impact their evaluation of applicants.

Similar-to-me. This error occurs when an applicant is given more favorable evaluations than warranted because of a similarity to the assessor in some way (e.g., race, sex, age, attitudes or background). The reverse, dissimilar-to-me, can also occur where an applicant is given a less favorable evaluation than warranted.

Reducing errors and bias

The following tactics may help to minimize the effects of error and bias in the assessment process:

- Be mindful of the errors and biases identified and make sure competency ratings are based on the behavioural evidence collected.
- Throughout the interview, take detailed notes to document the referee's comments.
- At the beginning of the interview, remind referees that providing information on a former or current employee is within the bounds of legality, and encourage openness and honesty.
- To minimize the leniency effect and the "halo" bias, ask the referee to comment on the applicant's developmental needs for each competency.
- Rather than relying solely on the "safe" references that most applicants provide, ask for the names of additional references.
- Seek behavioural evidence to move beyond whether the referee likes or dislikes the applicant to gain an understanding of *why* this is the case.
- Pay attention to the more subtle cues from the referee such as tone of voice, intonation and brevity.

Integrating across referees

Obtaining the unique perspectives of different occupational levels can provide a richer assessment for a given competency. For example, for a team-related competency, employees can provide the leadership view, peers the team membership view and supervisors the team financial and risk management views. Certain perspectives may be more important in rating particular competencies because their roles provide exposure to different behavioural indicators. For instance, peer level ratings of teamwork may be more pertinent than those of managers. Similarly, employee ratings of people management (e.g., delegation and performance feedback) and management ratings of financial management may be particularly informative.

If there are multiple referees from different occupational levels (peers, employees and managers), it may be useful to integrate the information provided by referees within each level to obtain an overall rating for that level. The objective is to identify commonalities and discrepancies in the behavioural evidence provided. Similarly, differences in the overall ratings between levels may also be of interest.

Integrating across assessment methods

Integration across assessment methods is the process of corroborating, clarifying or adding to information that has been gathered by other assessment methods. This process will allow for a global assessment of the applicant's qualifications. If the information yielded by the reference check is inconsistent with that obtained from other sources, you will need to understand this discrepancy, perhaps via further reference checks or a discussion with the applicant.

If negative information is uncovered, consider its source and verify its accuracy with other sources of information before using it to make a decision about the applicant. If information is conflicting, continue checking until you are satisfied that a pattern is evident.

5. Informal Discussion and Applicant Feedback

Applicants may request feedback from a hiring manager on their performance on a structured reference check. Under the PSEA, informal discussion provides one mechanism through which internal applicants who are eliminated from consideration may obtain feedback. This section provides information on the role of informal discussion as it pertains to the structured reference check before outlining some important tips on how to effectively facilitate a performance feedback discussion.

The informal discussion

The informal discussion is an opportunity for applicants to discuss the decision to eliminate them. Should an applicant request feedback, consideration will need to be given to what information will be shared and how it will be given. A hiring manager should be prepared to provide an applicant with feedback on the reference check, should the situation arise. For information on the informal discussion process, please refer to the PSC Policy on Informal Discussion and the PSC Guide to Implementing the Informal Discussion Policy.

Applicants should be able to discuss any information pertaining to their candidacy that would help them understand the decision to eliminate them. Any applicant would normally have access to any personal information gathered in the appointment process. This information could include any factors that were taken into account, including the merit criteria used, how the assessment was carried out and the evaluation of that person. The information provided should relate only to the applicant. Personal information about others must not be disclosed.

If an applicant requests feedback on their performance on a structured reference check, they are entitled to this information. This information could include any of the following:

- Documents submitted by the applicant;
- The Reference Checking Form;
- Reference checkers' notes;
- The qualifications and behavioural indicators assessed;
- The assessment criteria; or
- The results of the applicant's assessment.

Providing applicant feedback

Providing applicants with feedback on their performance should be handled with sensitivity and professionalism. Here are some tips to keep in mind when providing such feedback.

- Review the documentation regarding the person who was eliminated from consideration.
- Stay focused on what is relevant to the discussion: the requirements of the position, the merit criteria, how you assessed the qualifications and why the person was eliminated.
- Stick to the facts and ensure that you can support your statements.
- Be fair to the person and consider the impact on others in the appointment process.
- Explain decisions and provide information that will assist the person in understanding.
- Listen to the person and provide the opportunity for them to explain any concerns and present any supporting information.
- Always verify your understanding of the situation before responding.
- Make this an opportunity to exchange views and share information. Be approachable and open to the discussion to allow for the opportunity to address concerns.
- Seek assistance if the issue is beyond what you are comfortable dealing with or if the discussion goes beyond the decision to eliminate the person from the appointment process.
- Maintain a non-defensive and non-confrontational manner throughout the discussion.
- Demonstrate a willingness to review a decision if an error was made.
- Consider deferring a contentious or heated discussion, to allow time to reflect and to address the issue at a later time and with assistance, if necessary.
- Resolve issues or, at the very least, ensure that there is an understanding of the decision.