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# Introduction

Of all the various assessment methods available, reference checks, also referred to as past work performance checks (PWP), are one of the most productive and useful sources of information about an applicant’s past performance and 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. Conducting reference checks allows a hiring manager to understand an applicant’s history of performance.

This is a mandatory step in the hiring process and is a factor of merit in BC Public Service hiring. These checks must be conducted and documented for all current BC Public Service employees who are either receiving an offer of employment, or being placed on an eligibility list. This Guide provides practical information about the key elements of the reference check process and best practices.

## Key Points

* **All appointments to the BC Public Service require completion of past work performance checks, including an employment reference from a supervisor or equivalent.**
* **Past work performance is one of the best predictors of future performance and must be assessed for all appointments.**
* **Thorough reference checks must be completed prior to extending a job offer.**

## Overview

A reference check is an 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.

**Structured reference checks are:**

* Job-related: The focus is on an applicant’s ability to perform the job-essential and asset job requirements. Structuring the reference check around job requirements will provide an accurate prediction of future job performance.
* Based on an observation of work: The information that is provided by a reference provider must be based on their own experience observing or working with the applicant.
* 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.
* Standardized: The same main questions asked of all reference providers. This consistency in approach helps to ensure that all applicants are treated consistently and that we obtain comparable information for each applicant.
* Focussed on job related behaviours.

# Part 1: Planning and Preparation

An effective reference check requires some planning and preparation. To create a reference check strategy for your next hiring decision, think about the following:

* What is the purpose of the reference check?
* What qualifications should be assessed?
* Who will conduct the reference checks?
* Who is an appropriate reference provider?

### The purpose of the reference check

An essential first stage in the planning process is to clarify the purpose of the reference check.

Determine both the type of information to collect and the process that you will use to collect it. The information that you collect from reference checks can serve four main purposes:

* verify the accuracy of the information that an applicant provided in the résumé, online questionnaire and/or during the interview;
* assess some of the job requirements ;
* uncover patterns of desirable or counterproductive behaviour in an applicant’s work history; and,
* identify the areas for development.

### Applicant’s role in the process

Applicant’s role is to:

* select relevant job related reference providers (one of which must be a supervisor or equivalent);
* provide the names of alternate reference providers;
* ensure that the reference providers have agreed to provide a reference and are available; and,
* give reference providers copies of the résumé and job posting and inform them of the hiring organization that will be conducting the interview.

Let your applicants know what is expected of them during the refererence check process.

## Frequently Asked Questions

1. **Do I need to obtain written authorization from an applicant before contacting the references they have provided?**

No, written authorization is not required; however, consent is required to contact any refereneces. An applicant gives express consent when they provide the references. Should you want to speak to additional references that have not been provided by the applicant, you will need to obtain applicant consent prior to contacting any additional references.

1. **Who is an appropriate reference provider?**

The most up-to-date, comprehensive information on the applicant’s performance will come from current and recent supervisors and peers. One of the reference providers must be a supervisor reference or equivalent.

The hiring manager should make it clear to applicants that reference providers must meet certain criteria in order for them to make a meaningful contribution to the appointment process. In particular, reference providers 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 about 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.

1. **How to prepare the reference providers?**

The hiring manager or a person conducting the reference check may provide the following documents toreference providers in advance for them to review:

* the job posting or job profile;
* Reference Check Form; as well as,
* competency definitions

Inform the reference provider that the reference will be used in the overall evaluation of the applicant and the information they provide can be requested by the applicant under the [Freedom Of Information Act And Protection Of Privacy Act](http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/96165_00).

1. **Am I limited to contacting only those references provided by the applicant?**

There are a variety of situations where you may need to contact references in addition to those initially provided by the applicant. Examples include:

* the applicant has provided the names of colleagues, not direct supervisors;
* no reference name is provided for particular jobs or time periods;
* the current supervisor’s name has not been provided;
* you have received contradictory reference information and wish to speak to other supervisors to get a clearer picture; and/or,
* the initial references provided insufficient or inconclusive information.

In order to contact other references who were not initially provided by the applicant, express consent by the applicant (whether internal or external to the BC Public Service) is required to do so. Contact the applicant directly and have a conversation about why you need additional names. Be clear about the references you need and explain that not having these additional names may inhibit you from considering the applicant further.

1. **What job requirements should be assessed?**

The following are some important questions to consider when deciding what job requirements you want to assess:

* Are there job requirements that are best evaluated over time (e.g., dealing with stress)?
* Can former supervisors/co-workers provide useful information?
* Are there job requirements that were not assessed during the interview?
* Do you need the reference to verify that the information provided by an applicant is accurate?

1. **When should the reference check be conducted?**

The reference check is usually conducted in the final stages of an assessment process. However, reference checks can also be done in the earlier stages. 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.

1. **What should the Reference Check Form include?**

You are encouraged to use the Reference Check template available on MyHR. The Reference Check template can be customized based on the job requirements and overall purpose of the reference.

1. **What types of questions to ask?**

When asking questions related to knowledge, skills/abilities and competencies, it is important to be consistent. This will help to ensure that all applicants are treated equally. Of course, reference providers vary in how they respond to questions; this will produce different conversations.

A Reference Check template has four main types of questions that are designed for different purposes:

* **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 reference provider’s working relationship with the applicant, as well as the applicant’s strengths and areas for development.
* **Questions for verification** - These questions serve to verify applicant information from other selection methods, such as the interview.
* **Job specific questions -** These questions ask reference providers to describe specific actions that the applicant has taken to demonstrate a series of job-relevant skills and competencies. The reference checker’s primary objective is to obtain facts and relevant examples, rather than opinions or general statements.
* **Overall performance questions** - Questions about attendance and conduct.

1. **Who should conduct the reference check interview?**

Ideally, the reference checks should be done by the hiring manager; the person who will be supervising the new employee and who is responsible for the appointment; or someone who has good knowledge of the position.

1. **How should the reference check interview be conducted?**

The reference check interview is usually conducted over the phone. Although it is also possible to check references in writing, this practice is not recommended since written reference checks do not make it possible to ask follow-up questions, or to observe and record observations such as hesitations, inconsistencies or spontaneous remarks. Written reference checks should be used as a last resort.

1. **How many references should I contact?**

This depends on the quality of the references you receive and the length and variety of the applicant’s work history. Your goal is to obtain enough relevant reference information to make an informed hiring decision.

For most applicants, one to two references should be sufficient. If the applicant has held a series of short-term jobs, you may need to speak to several supervisors to obtain the information you need. On the other hand, if the current supervisor has managed the applicant for several years in a relevant role, one reference may be sufficient.

1. **The applicant’s references from a previous organization say that company policy prohibits them from providing reference information. What should I do?**

Speak to the applicant; they may not have been aware of this policy. In most cases, applicants are able to provide alternate names, such as past supervisors who no longer work for that organization, or a contractor who works closely with the organization, but is not bound by the same policy. The onus lies with the applicant to provide you with viable, valid reference names.

1. **The applicant does not want to provide their current supervisor’s name, for fear of jeopardizing their current job. What should I do?**

This is an understandable reaction. However, without contacting the current supervisor, you may not have the full picture, and you are potentially missing the most relevant and up-to-date information about the individual’s present or most recent performance.

Applicants outside the BC Public Service may be reluctant to provide current supervisor reference early on in the hiring process. They may want to understand the terms of the pending offer and they may not want to provide their current supervisor reference until they are confident that they really want the job. It is completely understandable, and you can share such details with the external applicant prior to completing the reference check with the current supervisor. You may also decide to not contact the current supervisor reference and contact previous supervisor only.  
  
**14. If I don’t have an offer for external candidates yet, can I place them on my eligibility list and do the reference check when and if a vacancy becomes available?**

External applicants being placed on the eligibility list may have their reference checks deferred to the time of offer, at the discretion of the hiring manager. In order to do so, the eligibility list placement letter must state that any potential future offer is subject to successful reference/ past work performance checks. This applies to external candidates only.

# Part 2: Reference Check Interview

#### Stage 1: Initiating the discussion

It is important to begin the reference check interview by establishing a comfortable rapport with the reference provider and by ensuring that they understand the purpose, content and duration of the reference check. Provide a brief description of the duties and responsibilities of the target position before raising the points below.Tell the reference provider 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. Explain that the information provided can be requested by the applicant under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act. Encourage the reference provider to provide facts, concrete descriptions, relevant incidents and behavioural examples, rather than opinions.

#### Stage 2: general verification questions

Ask the general verification questions included in the Reference Check Template. These questions will allow you to obtain a clear understanding of the reference provider’s working relationship with the applicant, dates of employment, and general overview of their responsibilities.

#### Stage 3: job specific questions

Ask the reference provider to describe the performance of the applicant on each of the skills/abilities and/or competencies being assessed by the reference check. Ask the reference provider to include a description of the specific situation, context and applicant’s actions. Ask follow up questions to obtain sufficient information. It is helpful to ask: “Can you tell me more about that?”, or, if the reference provider responds with a generalization, “Can you give me a specific example?”

###### Verification of Competency Based examples provided in the interview

Verification of competency examples provided by the applicant is completely optional. If you decide to verify example(s) provided by the applicant, ensure you do so consistently for all applicants. If the information obtained by the reference check is inconsistent with that obtained from the applicant, you will need to understand this discrepancy, by asking further follow up questions and speaking to the applicant. If negative information is uncovered, consider its source and verify its accuracy 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.

#### Stage 4: overall performance questions

Ask overall performance questions to find out what are the applicant’s strengths and weaknesses and whether there are any issues related to performance, attendance and conduct.

#### Stage 5: closing the interview

Ask the reference provider if there are any additional comments related to the applicant’s job performance that they would like to add. You should conclude the interview by thanking the reference provider for their time and asking for permission to call back with any additional questions.

## Documentation

Keep detailed and comprehensive reference check notes. These notes are critical when evaluating the information and are required for your competition file, merit review requests and merit commissioner random audit request.

* Your notes should be a record of what the reference provider said, not your inferences or judgements.
* Note any responses that appear ambiguous or evasive, unusually hesitant or overly negative.
* Resist the tendency to assess the applicant while gathering information. Assessing the applicant during the reference check may detract from obtaining other valuable information.

# Part 3: Evaluating the Reference Check

The results obtained from reference checks should be evaluated carefully. Ratings should be assigned based on a thorough examination of the examples and evidence provided by the reference provider. The reference check evidence should be integrated across multiple reference providers to identify any common themes and discrepancies.

##### Assigning ratings

Competencies can be rated against a variety of scale types. The simplest scale provides only

“meets/does not meet” or “pass/fail” choices. Alternatively, you may decide to use numerical rating scale to make meaningful distinctions among applicants. Ratings provided for each competency should be accompanied by a brief explanation why the rating was given.

Below is an example of a combined (verbal and numerical) rating scale that can be used:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Poor- Unacceptable**  **0-1 point** | **Weak - Less than acceptable**  **2 points** | **Satisfactory Acceptable**  **3 points** | **Full performance Very good**  **4 points** | **Exceptional**  **5 points** |
| **FAIL** | **FAIL** | **PASS** | **PASS** | **PASS** |

##### Tips for assessing competencies

* Try not to place too much 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 reference provider 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 reference providers 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

Make every effort possible to minimize the potential for assessment errors and personal biases that may influence your evaluation. 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 or low.

**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 or bad 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. 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 favourable evaluations than warranted because of a similarity to the assessor in some way.

**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 your ratings are based on the factual evidence collected;
* throughout the interview, take detailed notes to document the reference provider’s comments; and,
* pay attention to the more subtle cues from the reference provider, such as tone of voice, intonation and brevity.

# Appendix:

## Checklist for the Hiring Manager

**Calling the reference provider to make an appointment for the interview**

* Ensure that the reference provider allocates enough time.
* Encourage the reference provider to prepare so that they can provide concrete examples of how the applicant has demonstrated the competencies.

**Initiating the discussion**

* Introduce yourself and the purpose of the interview; make sure that it is a good time for the reference provider to proceed. Reschedule if necessary.
* Introduce the steps that are required to complete the reference check and the amount of time that the discussion will take.
* Remind the reference provider to provide facts, concrete descriptions, relevant incidents and examples, rather than opinions.

**Conducting the interview**

* Take detailed notes on the reference provider’s examples and comments, as close to verbatim as possible.
* Follow the structured format to ensure that the same questions are asked about each applicant to ensure that all applicants are treated equitably.
* Focus on job-relevant behaviours that demonstrate the competencies.
* Use probing questions as required.
* Ensure that the assessment of overall performance is supported by concrete examples or facts.
* Thank the reference provider for their time and cooperation and ask whether you can call back if you have additional questions.

**Assessing the reference check**

* Proceed with the assessment after the call.
* Assess each area separately, one at a time.
* Review all of the information that has been collected.
* Avoid relying on subjective generalizations.
* Be aware of the assessor’s biases and take steps to minimize them wherever possible.

## Sample Applicant Instructions

##### Selecting your reference providers

We recommend that you to consider the following as you choose your reference providers:

* We require that you provide, at minimum, names and contact information of two (2) references.
* One of your references should be your current supervisor or equivalent.

##### Your reference providers should:

* have had an adequate opportunity to observe you in job-relevant situations;
* have an in-depth and direct knowledge of your work and be able to answer specific questions pertaining to your achievements and strengths;
* have worked with you recently and generally for at least six (6) months within the last five (5) years; and,
* be open and candid in communicating relevant information about your work performance.

##### Your contribution to the process:

* ensure that the reference providers have agreed to provide reference information, that they are available during the assessment process and inform them of when the hiring organization plans to call;
* consider providing your reference providers with a copy of your résumé, or sections of it that you feel are relevant,
* ensure that accurate and current contact information is provided; and,
* provide names of alternate reference providers on your reference provider list, if possible.

Sample Consent Statement

I, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, authorize the BC Public Service to contact the persons or organizations listed below for the purpose of obtaining reference information about my work performance.

Please provide your list of references by (date).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name of Reference Providers | Organization | Job Title | Working Relationship | Phone/Email | Duration of Employment |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

## Resources:

[Steps in the Hiring Process](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/hiring-managers/process?keyword=steps&keyword=in&keyword=the)

[Assessment and Selection](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/hiring-managers/process/assess-select?keyword=assessment)

[Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act](http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/96165_00)  
  
**Reference Check Templates**

* [Reference Check Template (use if you want to write your own questions)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/careers/for-hiring-managers/resources-for-hiring-managers/reference_check_template.docx" \t "_blank)
* [Reference Check Template Leadership (includes questions)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/careers/for-hiring-managers/resources-for-hiring-managers/reference-check-template-leadership.docx" \t "_blank)
* [Reference Check Template Managers, Supervisors and Staff (includes questions)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/careers/for-hiring-managers/resources-for-hiring-managers/reference-check-template-managers.docx" \t "_blank)

**Questions? Need more assistance?**

Contact [AskMyHR](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/myhr/static.page?ContentID=71ba3133-44e7-b440-11db-284ad666a504)

Last updated: November 2023