



## SELECTING THE RIGHT CANDIDATE

# INTERVIEW AND SELECTION GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION

Conducting an effective interview and reference checks is a skill, and the more you do it the better you will become. However, you can help yourself by being prepared and knowing what you can and cannot do related to the interview and reference check process. This short guide is designed to help HHS selecting officials by offering guidance on:

- Creating and asking interview questions,
- Evaluating applicant responses,
- Conducting the interview, and
- Completing reference checks

An average interview normally takes between 1 & 1-1/2 hours to complete. By investing additional time in the selection process, your organization will benefit from:

- Reduced turnover,
- Increased quality of performance based on better applicant/position matches,
- Decreased chance of selection decisions based upon illegal criteria, and
- Reduced applicant challenges to selection decisions

## Creating and Asking Interview Questions

Certain questions are inappropriate to ask an applicant and some are illegal. The safest way to avoid legal pitfalls is to be prepared and to adhere to issues that specifically relate to the job. If the answer to a question is not relevant to a person's ability to perform the proposed job functions, then there is no need to ask it. See the [Interview Do's and Don'ts Guide](#) for more information regarding interview questions.



*Matching the Right Person with the Right Job - Every Time*

When planning for an interview and drafting interview questions, you need to determine what skills and competencies are necessary and/or desirable for the position. You may be able to start with the job analysis used to prepare the vacancy announcement for your position. Does the position require teamwork, independence, good customer service skills, and/or the ability to multi-task? The interview questions naturally flow from the skills and competencies needed to successfully perform the job. For example, if you determine that leadership is important, you may want to use the following in your interviews: “Give me an example of a situation where you had to lead a project or team,” “What worked well; what didn’t?” “Tell me of a situation where you delegated work successfully” “Give me an example of when you were unsuccessful” “What went wrong?” Encourage lengthy detailed answers and ask follow-up questions. Prepare the questions in advance and keep the questions open ended so that the candidate has an opportunity to expand and elaborate on his or her answers. See the **Interview Questions Guide** for some suggested interview questions based on common job skill sets that are needed for many jobs.

Ask each applicant standard questions and keep notes on their responses using the **Interview Questions Form**. Studies have indicated that a structured interview format produces greater reliability and effectiveness in the selection process. This is especially true when several candidates are interviewed for a position, and are all given the same questions. This makes the evaluation of the candidates easier because the comparison is against the same criteria. In addition to the standard questions, you may also ask individualized questions relevant to the applicant’s ability to perform the job based on each applicant’s experience.

**Review applicant information, education and work experience, training, etc. prior to the interview.** Question any unusual gaps in employment and make sure the data flows in logical sequence. Ask the applicant to elaborate on educational achievements, part-time and summer jobs, extracurricular activities, professional memberships, etc., particularly as they relate to your job. Ask the applicant to elaborate on specific post-degree job progression, especially the reasons for leaving a particular job and why the next job was selected.

**Review job performance and responsibilities regarding the last three jobs.** Ask questions that require answers about the situation or environment within which performance was achieved. Questions about actual past experiences are often preferable to hypothetical questions where the individual can imagine the best possible way to handle something rather than how they actually did handle a situation. If you present a hypothetical or actual problem from the subject position that needs to be solved, consider the response to the examples they gave from actual past work experience.

Ask the applicant to elaborate on their career plans and aspirations and how they feel about their career progress to date. Ask the applicant to elaborate on his/her own strengths and weaknesses. Wrap up the interview questions by asking the applicant **“What are two or three job related things that I should know about you that I did not ask about?”**



# Evaluating Applicant Responses

You may wish to use the **Interview Questions Form** when taking handwritten notes of each applicant's responses to the standard questions and the individualized questions. Prior to the interview, type the standard and individualized questions on the form. Never write directly on the applicant's resume and never write notes that are not relevant to the job. You may write your evaluation of the applicant's response using a consistent method among all interviewed applicants. For example, you may use a rating scheme of "A, B, C, etc." based on your evaluation of the applicant's ability to perform the job based on the response.

## Conducting the Interview

Consider starting the interview by explaining the **structure of the organization** and indicate how the position fits in with the rest of the organization. Discuss products, facilities, work environment, employee population, and organizational philosophy. Explain to the candidate the job for which he or she is applying. Ask the applicant all the standard and individualized questions and take notes on the interview question form. Finish the interview by asking the applicant a question to the effect of **"Do you have any questions you would like me to answer?"** Once those questions have been answered, thank the applicant for coming to the interview and inform him or her of the next steps in the process (i.e. the timeframe in which you expect to make a selection decision or if there will be a second round of interviews, etc.)

## Completing Reference Checks

As a selecting official you are responsible for conducting reference checks prior to offering any job. Checking references before making a job offer can save time, money, and effort, since it reduces the likelihood of making an inappropriate selection. Some applicants provide false or exaggerated information. Use reference checks as a final way to clarify or validate information received by the applicant before making a job offer. You may wish to prepare the **Reference Check Form** in advance and use it to write notes while completing a reference check. The following are tips for effectively checking references:

- Once you have selected your final candidates, ask the applicant if you may contact all of their listed references.
- Ensure that at least one reference is a former or current supervisor and ensure that all references are individuals who have worked with the candidate (the immediate past supervisor is usually one of your best reference sources).



- Always maintain confidentiality and retain your notes from reference checks.
- Ask open-ended questions such as “What duties did this applicant perform?”
- Ask about the applicant’s strengths and weaknesses.
- Describe your vacant position and ask the reference how he or she feels the candidate would fit into the position.
- Disregard information about which the reference has no first-hand knowledge or that is unrelated to the applicant’s work behaviors, skills, performance, and qualifications.
- Always check more than one reference.
- Listen carefully to the reference’s tone for an indication of underlying feelings.
- Conduct reference checks on all applicants you are seriously considering for the position.

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) developed a comprehensive guide to making reference checks for Federal employment. For more information on this subject, see **Making the Call**.



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