



**Indian Health Service
Guide on Conducting Effective Interviews and
Reference Checks
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Conducting Effective Interviews and Reference Checks

Introduction

Conducting an effective interviews 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 IHS selecting officials by offering guidance on:

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

By investing time in the selection process, your office/department will benefit from:

- Reduced turnover
- Increased quality of performance based on better applicant/position matches,
- Decreased chance of selection decisions based upon illegal criteria
- 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 Appendix 1 for some "do's and don'ts" regarding interview questions.

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. 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, ask the candidate the following questions: "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 Appendix 2 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 (see Appendix 3). 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 different 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 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

Appendix 3 contains the Interview Questions form that you may wish to use 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 “1, 2, 3, etc.” based on your evaluation of the applicant’s ability to perform the job based on the response.

Conducting the Interview

Start 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 step in the process (i.e. the timeframe before a selection is made or if there will be a second round of interviews, etc.)

If the candidate informed you that he or she would need special accommodations in advance of the interview, you should work with your Area/HQ office on resources and options available.

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. Appendix 4 contains a Reference Check form for all positions that you may wish to prepare in advance and write notes on while completing a reference check. Appendix 5 contains a fillable Reference Check form for Non-Supervisory positions. 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 or request a list of references you may contact. Request the applicant to provide at least one former or current supervisor you may contact for a reference 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 the 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 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.

Interview Do's and Don'ts

<i>Category</i>	Questions You May Ask	Questions You Cannot Ask
Sex and Family Arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If applicant has any relatives already employed by the organization—only relevant if within the chain of command of job at hand or in selecting process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex of applicant • Number of children • Marital status • Spouse's occupation • Child care arrangements • Health care coverage through spouse • Sexual orientation of applicant
Race		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant's race or color of skin • Photo to be affixed to application form
National Origin or Ancestry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to speak/write English fluently (if job related) • Other languages spoken (if job related) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnic association of a surname • Birthplace of applicant or applicant's parents • Nationality, lineage, national origin • Nationality of applicant's spouse • Whether applicant is citizen of another country • Applicant's native tongue/English proficiency • Maiden name (of married woman)
Religion		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious affiliation/availability for weekend work • Religious holidays observed
Age		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date of birth • Date of high school graduation • Age
Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether an applicant can perform the essential job related functions, and how, if appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If applicant has a disability (even if the impairment is obvious) • Nature or severity of a disability • Whether applicant has ever filed a worker's compensation claim • Recent or past surgeries and dates • Past medical problems
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricted or suspended license, revoking of privileges, reports on NPDB • Academic, vocational, or professional schooling • Training received in the military • Membership in any trade or professional association • Job references—All of these areas should be provided as part of the application; only certain job-related follow-up questions would be appropriate in the interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and kinds of arrests • Political affiliation of the applicant • Physical characteristics (i.e. height, weight, strength, etc.) – except if a bona fide occupational qualification • Veteran status, discharge status, branch of service • Contact in case of emergency (at application or interview stage) • Bankruptcy and credit affairs

Interview Questions Related to Job Skill Sets

Below is a sampling of interviewing questions related to job skill sets. The below questions are only suggestions and you may decide to use different questions in addition to or in place of these questions.

Time Management Skills (Is the candidate able to develop action plans and accomplish tasks when under time constraints?)

- Have you ever been in a situation where you had equally important assignments with the same deadline? How did you prioritize these assignments? What happened? Did you get the assignments accomplished?
- Describe a time when you were able to organize and plan to get a task accomplished.

Communication (Is the candidate adept at communicating orally and in writing?)

- Tell me about an experience in which you had to talk in front of a large group
- Tell me about a time you were able to persuade someone to see something your way.
- Describe your experience in developing written products that you think will assist you in this position.

Leadership (Is the candidate able to effectively influence the actions of other for a desired result?)

- Give me an example of a time when you had to take the lead in a work group? How do you go about getting cooperation?
- Give me an example of a situation where you delegated work successfully? Give me an example of when you were unsuccessful? What went wrong?

Assertiveness (Is the candidate able to express and communicate his or her opinions maturely in spite of disagreement?)

- Tell me about a time when you were able to express an opposing opinion at work? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your supervisor's assessment or ideas regarding a work assignment. What did you do?

Flexibility/Ability to Deal with Change (Is the candidate able to work in an environment with frequent change?)

- Describe a situation where you had to deal with frequent unexpected events on the job. How did you react? What did you do to make the best of the situation?
- Tell me about a time when you were able to change in order to accomplish a goal at work.

Interpersonal Skills (Is the candidate able to communicate with others to build rapport and credibility?)

- Describe a time when a client/customer was upset and you worked to defuse the situation.
- Describe a time when you were reassuring and supporting of a colleague.

Interview Questions Form

Interview Questions

Applicant Name:

Position Applied For:

Interview Date:

Person(s) Conducting Interview:

Start the interview by explaining the structure of the organization and indicate how the position fits in with the rest of the organization. Discuss work environment, employee population, and organizational philosophy. Explain to the candidate the job for which he or she is applying. Once all questions have been answered, thank the applicant for coming to the interview and inform him or her of the next step in the process (i.e. the timeframe before a selection is made, if there will be a second round of interviews)

Example Rating system: 1 (poor/less than expected); 3 (good/acceptable); 5 (excellent)

Interview Questions:	Rating: 1 3 5
1.	1 3 5
2.	1 3 5
3.	1 3 5
4.	1 3 5
5.	1 3 5
6.	1 3 5
7.	1 3 5

8.	1 3 5
9.	1 3 5
10.	1 3 5
11.	1 3 5
12.	1 3 5
13.	1 3 5
14,	1 3 5
15. Do you have any questions you would like me to answer?	1 3 5
Total Points:	

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Reference Check Form

Applicant Name: _____

Date Called: _____

Person Conducting Reference Check: _____

I have verified that the applicant has provided permission before conducting this reference check.

Reference name _____

Reference's organization _____

Dates of Employment:

From: _____ To: _____

Position(s) Held _____

Salary History _____

Reason for Leaving

Explain the reason for your call and verify the above information with the supervisor (including the reason for leaving)

- 1.) Please describe the type of work for which the candidate was responsible.

- 2.) How would you describe the applicant's relationships with coworkers, subordinates (if applicable), and with superiors?

3.) How is the applicant's work attitude? Please elaborate.

4.) How would you describe the quantity and quality of output generated by the former employee?

5.) How would you describe his/her attendance and reliability as it relates to the position he/she had with you?

6.) What were his/her strengths on the job?

7.) What were his/her weaknesses on the job?

8.) What is your overall assessment of the candidate?

9.) Would you recommend him/her for this position? Why or why not?

10.) Would you rehire this individual? Why or why not?

11.) Can you recommend one or two other sources that I should seek references from for this candidate?

12.) Other Comments?

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Reference Check Form (Non-Supervisory Positions)

Clear Form

The Indian Health Service is conducting reference checks of a candidate under consideration for a positions. You were identified as a current or former supervisor or colleague. Your information is valuable and a critical part of the selection process. Please keep your responses work-related. Personal information will not be considered during the selection process.

Requested by (name and title): _____ Date requested: _____

Candidate's name: _____ Position applied for: _____

Reference completed by (name and title): _____ Date completed: _____

Email and Phone: _____

Relationship to candidate: Colleague Supervisor Other Please describe: _____

Length of association with candidate: _____ How long ago? _____

Is the candidate a current employee? Yes No

Candidate's dates of employment confirmed as: FROM: _____ TO: _____

Candidate's job title confirmed as: _____

Outstanding: Major Strength, Greatly Exceeds Expectations; **Average:** Neither Strength Nor Development Need, Achieves Expectations; **Low:** Major development area, Does Not Achieve Expectations; **Don't know:** Not Enough Information

Could you give me a brief description of the duties the candidate performed?

How well would you rate the candidate's technical knowledge of the work? Outstanding Average Low Don't know
Comments?

Overall, how would you rate his/her personal effectiveness skills and traits?

Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Work organization/Time Mgmt	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Quality of Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Initiative/Perseverance	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Personal Integrity	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Dependability	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Adaptability	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Stress tolerance	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Job/Organization Commitment	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Safety Awareness	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know

Comments?

Is the candidate independent while completing work assignments? Outstanding Average Low Don't know
Comments?

How would you rate the candidate's communication skills?

Written/Documentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Oral Communication	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Listening	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know

Comments?

How would you describe the candidate's interpersonal skills?

Customer Relations	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Peers/Co-worker Relations	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
Teamwork	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know

Comments?

What kind of work-related training, certificates, education, or other qualifications does the candidate have?

Is there anything else you can tell me about the candidate's ability to perform his/her job? (e.g., candidate's strengths, weaknesses, or areas where he/she could improve upon)

Would you recommend him/her for this position? Yes No Why or why not?

Thank you for your valuable time in completing this request!

Please respond as soon as possible by e-mailing this form to: