

Referee checking can be one of the most valuable parts of the assessment process. However its effectiveness can be limited by panel perceptions of what they can and, importantly, cannot ask of referees. By simply knowing what information it is appropriate to ask for, you can add value to your assessment process. You can, for example, ask about:

- **Job performance**

Knowing about past performance can alert you to both strengths and weaknesses that may not be obvious from your assessment process. So, if you want information about both general and specific job performance, then ask!

*Examples:* How would the referee summarise the applicant's performance in general? To what extent does the applicant meet specific objectives (work quality, deadlines, etc.)? What degree of supervision does the applicant need to achieve their work outcomes? Have there been poor performance issues that needed to be managed? If so, what were the performance issues and what was the outcome? What are the applicant's strengths and weakness in relation to the knowledge, skills and abilities that form the basis for assessment?

- **Disciplinary history**

A previous disciplinary history could indicate ongoing performance or work behaviour issues. You can ask if the applicant has a disciplinary history, the basis for any disciplinary action and the outcome.

*Examples:* Has the applicant ever been disciplined in relation to their performance or workplace behaviour? What was the reason for the disciplinary action and how long ago did it happen? Did the applicant respond to the disciplinary process by satisfactorily resolving the performance or behaviour? Has that change been sustained over time?

- **Workplace behaviour**

The way someone has previously behaved can be indicative of future behaviour. Again you can ask for both general and specific information about workplace behaviour.

*Examples:* Does the applicant contribute positively to the workplace environment for their colleagues, managers, clients? In what ways? How does the applicant respond to feedback? Do they contribute positively to team objectives? How?

- **Attendance**

Knowledge about a pattern of absences can be as important as how often someone is away. Can you afford for your new team member not to show when you need them the most? Circumstances surrounding an absence can be important. Could it be that a string of absences are linked to a person's inability to deal with certain situations or people?

*Examples:* Would the referee say that the applicant's attendance has been average for employees, better than average or not as good as average? Has the applicant ever needed to be counselled about excessive sick leave or particular patterns of absence? Have there been any issues of the applicant taking sick leave at critical times, for example during peak workloads or in the midst of difficult work situations?

- **Ability to operate in a specific work environment**

If it's important that an applicant needs to operate in a particular environment, you can ask referees to comment on the ability or potential of the applicant to succeed in that environment.

*Example:* The role may require an ability to deal with clients whose expectations of service are higher than the work area is resourced to deliver. What indications are there that the applicant could operate in the demands of this environment? What strategies has the referee seen the applicant put into place to deal with similar circumstances?

- **Validation**

You can ask the referee to validate information provided by the applicant. In some cases this will reveal that an applicant has been modest and not fully explained their role, the challenges they faced, the complexity of an issue etc. In other cases it might reveal that an applicant has overstated their case or, in a worst-case scenario, invented their achievements. You can also check with referees whether work tendered as part of a work sample (for example, written work) is in fact the work of the applicant.

*Examples:* Did the applicant lead a particular project? Were they responsible for suggestions that led to major changes in the way certain work was performed? Are they clients' most preferred source of advice?

- **Clarification**

An applicant may have said something or done something during the assessment that gives you an uneasy feeling. Use the opportunity to explore areas of concern you may have.

*Example:* The role may require regular contact with aggrieved clients, so the appointee will need to be confident in handling conflict situations. The responses that the applicant provided on this aspect of the work at interview were excellent, but the applicant presented as being extremely anxious. Was this just interview nerves? Have they needed to deal with conflict situations in their present role or a previous role, and how well have they managed these situations in real life?

*Source: Office of the Public Service Commissioner 'Recruitment and Selection Resources'*