**June 2021**

IBC Interview Guide

*A Practical Guide to Effective Interviewing*

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# I. **Introduction**

The purpose of this guide is to aid hiring officials in selecting the best possible employees by getting the most out of the interview process. An interview should be viewed as a dual opportunity: an opportunity for a hiring manager to learn more about a candidate’s experience and background; and an opportunity for the candidate to learn more about your organization and positions.

This guide also includes an emphasis on structured interviews. Generally speaking, structured interviews ensure candidates have equal opportunities to provide information and are assessed accurately and consistently.

In addition to this resource, consult your internal office policy, if applicable, as well as your servicing Human Resources (HR) Specialist for additional information and guidance. Hiring officials retain full responsibility and accountability for their hiring decisions.

**Important Information:** On February 5, 2020 OPM issued updated Time to Hire (T2H) guidance that can be found at: <https://www.opm.gov/news/releases/2020/02/opm-issues-updated-time-to-hire-guidance/>

The OPM End to End Hiring Roadmap 80-Day Hiring Model applies to all Federal agencies. It is recommended that hiring managers complete the interview process (to include reference checks) within the 15 day time frame referenced in the [OPM End to End Hiring Roadmap 80-Day Hiring Model](https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-management/hiring-reform/reference/end-to-end-hiring-initiative.pdf).

For the Department of Interior (DOI): On July 23, 2020, DOI issued [Personnel Bulletin (PB) 20-09](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/elips/documents/personnel-bulletin-20-09-time-to-hire-reporting-requirements-508.pdf) Time to Hire Reporting Requirements to establish measurements and framework that DOI will utilize as key performance indicators (KPI) of overall hiring processes efficacy and required reporting to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

* T2H Measure 5 is directly impacted by the hiring manager as this measure reports on the number of days from the Certificate Issue Date (start date for measure) to the Certificate Review Return Date (end date of measure)

To assist hiring managers in meeting this measure, IBC has created a T2H checklist with suggestions on how to streamline the interview process. This checklist is located on the IBC website:

\*\*Link on IBC Net\*\* Hiring Manager Checklist: Expediting Time to Hire

# II. Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are demonstrably fair and compliant. Documentation is an integral part of the structured interview. A written record of how an interview was developed, conducted, and applied is extremely valuable if it becomes necessary to formally justify an employment decision based on an interview. There are several advantages that contribute to their effectiveness:

* ***Fairness and objectivity.*** Structured interviews use job-related questions, treat interviewees consistently, and assess interviewees' responses in a thorough, systematic manner. Structured interviews also focus on the interviewees' answers rather than on their behavior during the interview. The result is that a good structured interview treats candidates — and their responses — fairly and objectively, with little or no adverse impact.
* ***Professionalism.*** Structured interviews are businesslike; they focus strictly on the candidate's qualifications in relation to the job requirements. Such interviews can help *sell* by conveying the message that we are serious about evaluating candidates carefully and selecting the best person for the job.
* ***Selling.*** “Selling" the job also involves providing information about the job and work environment and showing a genuine interest in the candidate. Structured interviewing does not preclude doing these things. For example, an interview could begin with the interviewer providing information about the job and the work setting, followed by structured questions, and conclude with an opportunity for the interviewee to ask questions. The interviewer simply needs to ensure that providing information to the candidate does not overshadow collecting information from the candidate.
* ***Compliance.***Laws and regulations set a high standard for Federal employment practices. The statutory merit system principles state that "selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity." To achieve this objective, needs to ensure that their employment interviews are nondiscriminatory. A structured interview can meet this requirement.
* ***Acceptance and defensibility.*** Candidates expect prospective employers to assess their qualifications thoroughly and fairly. Candidates will tend to accept, and be less likely to challenge, employment practices that are clearly job-related and even-handed. From this perspective, interviews that are objective are to be preferred to interviews that are more sociable and subjective. The structured interview contains several highly visible elements to promote fairness and objectivity, and thus ensure candidate acceptance.

## **Developing a Structured Interview**

There are 3 fundamental steps in developing a structured interview.

1. Base Questions on a Job Analysis
2. Choose the Interview Format and Develop Questions
3. Create Interview Probes

### 1. Base Questions on a Job Analysis

Before you sit down to develop your interview questions, obtain the Job Opportunity Announcement (JOA), position description, job analysis, and assessment tool that were used for the position from your HR Specialist. The structured interview is typically used to assess between four and six competencies unless the job is unique or at a high level. Think carefully about the skills/competencies that you choose to assess – some (e.g., oral communication and presentation skills) are easier to assess during an interview than others (e.g., accuracy and dependability). In deciding which to assess, you should also consider which are most important for the candidate to possess immediately upon entry into the position, versus those that can be developed on the job.

### 2. Develop Questions

An interview based on questions about past behaviors is a behavioral description interview, also known as a behavioral event interview. An interview based on questions about hypothetical behavior is a situational interview.

The agency may elect to include questions derived from both the behavioral and situational interview formats.

Interview questions should be:

1. Reflective of competencies derived from a job analysis
2. Realistic of the responsibilities of the job
3. Open-ended
4. Clear and concise
5. At a reading level appropriate for the candidates
6. Free of jargon
7. Consistent for all candidates interviewed

**Use the STAR Model**

Interview questions should elicit three important pieces of information from the candidate:

* + - **Situation or Task:** Describes the context or background for the event of the tasks involved
    - **Action:** Describes exactly what was done or what would be done
    - **Result:** Describes the consequence of the candidate’s actions

***Behavioral Interview Questions.***

The primary purpose of the behavioral interview is to gather information from job candidates about their *actual* behavior during *past* experiences which demonstrates competencies required for the job. The underlying premise is the best predictor of future behavior on the job is past behavior under similar circumstances.

For example, consider the competency, Interpersonal Skills, defined as: “shows understanding, friendliness, courtesy, tact, empathy, concern, and politeness to others; develops and maintains effective relationships with others; may include effectively dealing with individuals who are difficult, hostile, or distressed; relates well to people from varied backgrounds and different situations; is sensitive to cultural diversity, race, gender, disabilities, and other individual differences.” This definition could lead to a behavioral interview question focused on a candidate’s past behavior such as:

Describe a situation in which you dealt with individuals who were difficult, hostile, or distressed. Who was involved? What specific actions did you take and what was the result?

***Writing Behavioral Interview Questions.*** Convene a group of approximately six or seven subject matter experts (SMEs). These SMEs should be experienced, high-performing employees or supervisors who possess knowledge of the job at the level of the position to be filled. Typically, SMEs are at the full performance grade level or higher.

* Have SMEs familiarize themselves with the competencies (and their definitions) to be measured by the interview.
* Have SMEs work together to write interview questions.
* Each question should measure at least one of the specified competencies.
* Each question should be written to elicit *specific details* about a situation, task, or context, the actions the person took or did not take, and the impact of these actions.
* SMEs should use superlative adjectives in the questions (e.g., most, last, worst, least) to help the candidate focus on specific incidents.
* SMEs should develop more questions than are actually needed to allow for subsequent discarding of questions during review and tryout.

***Situational Interview Format and Questions.***

In contrast to the behavioral interview, the questions in a situational interview are based on future-oriented behavior. Situational interview questions give the candidate realistic job scenarios or dilemmas and ask how they *would* respond. The underlying premise is a person’s intentions are closely tied to their actual behavior.

An example situational interview question for the competency Interpersonal Skills is:

A very angry client walks up to your desk. They say they were told your office sent them an overdue check five days ago. They claim they have not received the check. They say they have bills to pay, and no one will help them. How would you handle this situation?

***Writing Situational Interview Questions.***

* Assemble a group of subject matter experts (SMEs) who have extensive knowledge about the job.
* Have the SMEs review the competencies (and their definitions) to be measured by the interview and the job tasks linked to the competencies.
* Have SMEs write examples of effective and ineffective behaviors (i.e., critical incidents) which reflect the competencies and associated tasks.
* Arrange for a separate group of SMEs to read each critical incident and identify the competency they believe the incident best illustrates.
* This will confirm whether the critical incidents can be clearly linked to the specific competencies to which they are supposed to be linked.
* Eliminate critical incidents not clearly linked to a competency and those associated with multiple competencies.
* Have SMEs rewrite the retained critical incidents in the form of hypothetical situations.
* These hypothetical situations should still demonstrate the correct competency.
* The hypothetical situations should be as real as possible and reflective of the job.
* As with the behavioral interview, have SMEs develop more questions than are actually needed to allow for future elimination.

### 3. Create Interview Probes

A probe is a question asked by the interviewer to help clarify a candidate’s response or ensure the candidate has provided enough information. These questions help elicit additional information that is needed in order to fully understand a candidate’s response. When probes are necessary, interviewers should use very similar probes for all candidates to ensure candidates are given the same opportunities to excel. While probes may need to be tailored to address each candidate’s specific response, the general meaning of the probes should not change. Candidate’s responses are likely to vary in length and level of detail.

Probe questions such as *“What was your role in that effort?”*, *“How frequently did you perform that activity?”*, *“Who was the audience for that presentation?”*, *“What was the outcome of that situation?”*, etc. can help interviewers obtain the specific details they need to assess a candidate’s proficiency in a given competency. Probe questions can also be helpful when dealing with a candidate who is less talkative.

Prior to the interview, establish the desired range of probing (for example, no probes, a limited number of probes, unlimited probes). If probes will be used, determine the specific probes for each question the interviewer is allowed to use. See Appendix B for a list of sample probe questions.

# III. General Interview Information and Recommendations

## **Before the Interview**

**Assemble job information.** Obtain thejob opportunity announcement, position description, job analysis, and assessment tool that were used for the position. Review the documentation to determine those skills/competencies that are most important and required upon entry for the position. Try to choose competencies that distinguish superior performance (that the best performers demonstrate in the workplace).

**Develop interview questions.**  When developing these questions, ask yourself; how does the question you are asking relate to the job? If you cannot make a connection between the job and the proposed interview question you should throw the question out. This step is important because all questions asked in the interview must be job related. Questions not relevant to the job are not only superfluous but could be a source of litigation. Once you have identified the essential components, you can list the job-related competencies required to do this job successfully.

**Review the applications.** Review the applications and supplemental documentation provided by the applicant. Determine based on job related criteria who to interview.

**Interview Panel**. Interviews are typically conducted by a panel of interviewers. A typical panel consists of three people (the hiring manager plus two others). Panel members should have extensive knowledge of the job and be at or above the grade level of the position being filled. There are several advantages to using interview panels. First, additional interviewers bring additional perspectives, which can result in a more balanced picture of the job candidate. Second, interviewers hear things differently during interviews, can provide clarifying or probing questions (see section 3 and appendix B for additional information on probe questions) and capture information that a single interviewer might miss or overlook. Third, additional interviewers can bring demographic diversity to the interview panel, which can make candidates more comfortable during the interview and more accepting of the outcome of the interview.

**Set-up the interview.** When planning the logistics of the interview, there are a few things to keep in mind.

* Location – Pick a location that will be comfortable for the applicant. Avoid having a barrier, such as a desk, between you and the applicant. Consider the accessibility of the location and that is easy for all applicants to get to, unless interviews are being conducted via phone.
* Accessibility – When scheduling interviews ensure the applicant has access to the appropriate technology, ensure that links are sent to the interviewee well in advance to afford ample time for the interviewee to log in and get set up in order to be prepared for the interview, or set up a conference line and provide the information to the interviewee as applicable.

## **During the Interview**

**Create a comfortable environment:** The day of the interview, make sure a staff member is available to greet the applicant and show them to the interview. When it is time to start the interview, remember to:

* Start the interview on time
* Welcome the candidate in a warm and friendly manner.
* Thank the candidate for their interest in the position and for coming to the interview.
* Explain the interview process in a standardized way. You may also provide this information in writing to each candidate.
* Inform the candidate that notes will be taken throughout the interview.
* Briefly describe the job and relevant organizational characteristics to allow candidates to become comfortable in the interview setting. Topics to include:
  + Status of selection process
  + Essential functions of the position
  + Work Environment
* Ask the candidate if they have any questions before beginning.

**Probe.** Candidates' responses are likely to vary in length and level of detail. This is acceptable, as long as you obtain enough information to rate each candidate fairly and accurately. You may need to request additional examples or more specifics to fully understand the candidate's answer. Probing, done tactfully, also gives a candidate who is less talkative the opportunity to describe their relevant experience. See Appendix B for Sample Probe Questions.

**Take Notes.** Your notes should include the experiences that the candidate describes to you. List enough information in order to recall the experience when it comes time to evaluate the candidate's skills. You should retain documentation of your interviews for at least three years (for DOI) or reference your agency policy for records retention so that you can justify the reasons for your selection if needed. The notes that you keep should summarize the characteristics of each applicant and show that you covered the same general topics.

**Answer candidate questions.** The interview is also a recruitment tool—or, viewed from the candidate's perspective, a way for the candidate to assess the prospective employer. Providing an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions helps the candidate make a well-informed employment decision, thus increasing the odds of a good fit between employee and employer. It also shows interest in the candidate, which is part of effective recruiting.

## **After the Interview**

**Assess.** Evaluate the candidate based on your notes. Document your assessment. If there is litigation over your selection, a third party will be deciding whether there was fair consideration given to all applicants. You will be asked to provide your detailed notes in order to support your decision. Since memories are fallible, you should retain documentation of your interviews for at least three years so that you can explain the reasons for your selection. The notes that you keep should summarize the characteristics of each applicant and show that you covered the same general topics.

**Evaluating the interview.** After conducting the interview consider the following and make necessary changes for future vacancies:

* Do the interview questions make useful job-related distinctions among candidates?
* Are you (and other interviewers) comfortable with the interview questions and process?
* How are candidates performing on the interview? Are different groups performing differently?
* How are selecting officials using the results of the interview?
* Do selecting officials believe that the interview is successful at identifying good employees?
* How do candidates perceive the interview?

Evaluating the interview process will ensure that the interview remains relevant, useful, and defensible.

**Exercise judgement in hiring.**The interview process is an excellent method for assessing job candidates and ensuring that the hiring process is valid and job-related. However, interview results alone should not dictate the selection decision. Judgment also comes into play, and managers and supervisors should consider a full range of information when making a selection decision. This information can include things such as the candidates’ past performance (performance appraisals), awards, training and experience, and reference checks. Indeed, no assessment tool – no matter how statistically valid or reliable – can measure and weigh every relevant factor of the selection. Ultimately, it is up to the manager or supervisor to determine which candidate represents the best “fit” for the position and the organization based on job-related, factual, and objective information.

For DOI: Due weight consideration is a merit promotion review process used to provide consideration to performance appraisals and awards submitted with the application. For DOI Merit Promotion certificates, selecting officials have an obligation to consider performance appraisals and awards during the selection process. Reference information provided in the certificate review instruction in USA Staffing when you receive your certificate of eligibles. Additional information on due weight can be referenced in the links below:

[DOI PB 20-20 Agency Merit Promotion Plan Policy and Staffing Guidance dated 11/10/2020](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/elips/documents/pb-20-20-doi-merit-promotion-staffing-policy-11.10.2020.pdf)

[Merit Promotion and Staffing Policy Personnel Handbook](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/pb-20-20-doi-merit-promotion-staffing-policy-handbook.pdf)

# IV. Common Biases in Interviewing

**Interpersonal Bias and Rating Errors.**

Interviews are by far the most common selection tool in the hiring process, however they can also be the most biased selection tool. These biases include human judgment, limitations, and interviewer biases. Interviewers should refrain from considering any non-performance related factors when making judgments. Interviewers can minimize these biases and errors by thoroughly understanding the competencies being assessed and by learning to compare the behaviors exhibited in the interview with the behaviors anchoring the proficiency-level ratings for each competency.

1. **Stereotyping Bias:** Forming an opinion about how people of a given gender, religion, race, appearance, or other characteristic think, act, respond, or would perform the job without any evidence that this is the case.

*Example*: Forming the opinion that a candidate who is pregnant will not perform well in the job and use a lot of leave and allowing that to impact your assessment of the candidate’s ability to successfully perform the duties of the position.

1. **Confirmation Bias:** When an interviewer creates a pre-conceived belief about an applicant prior to the interview and seeks out information to support that belief during the interview.

*Example*: Having a belief that a candidate is highly intelligent and only paying attention to information throughout the interview that is consistent with that belief, and allowing that to impact your assessment of the candidate’s ability to successfully perform the duties of the position.

1. **First Impression Bias**: Making judgements about an interviewee based on their first impression being positive or negative.

*Example*: Making a judgment of a candidate based on a first impression of their attire and allowing that to impact your assessment of the candidate’s ability to successfully perform the duties of the position.

1. **“Similar to Me” Effect**: Thinking highly of someone who has a similar mind set or personality to the interviewer.  People have a natural tendency to prefer others who are similar in various ways to themselves. Interviewers should concentrate on the responses given by the candidate in making evaluations, rather than on the outward characteristics and personality of the candidate.

*Example*: Discovering in an interview that a candidate has a similar mindset as it relates to teamwork and favoring that candidate over another that may be more qualified and prepared to perform well in the job.

1. **Negative Emphasis Bias**: When the interviewer receives a small amount of negative information and uses it to base their entire hiring decision off of it. We tend to weigh negative information heavier than positive information.

*Example*: Developing a negative opinion of a candidate’s tattoo or piercing and weighing that information more heavily than job-related data and competencies and impact your assessment of the candidate’s ability to successfully perform the duties of the position.

1. **Halo and Horn Effect:** Allowing ratings of performance in one competency to influence ratings for other competencies.

***Example* Halo Effect:** Allowing a candidate’s self-confident attitude to overshadow lack of experience in a particular requirement and impact your assessment of the candidate’s ability to successfully perform the duties of the position.

***Example*** Horn Effect: Allowing a candidate’s low self-confident attitude to overshadow their experience in a particular requirement and impact your assessment of the candidate’s ability to successfully perform the duties of the position.

**Common Mistakes in Interview Ratings**

1. **Central Tendency:** A tendency to rate all competencies at the middle of the rating scale (for example, giving all “3s” on a 5-point scale). When hesitating over making a high rating, interviewers should realize such a rating does not indicate perfect performance; it means demonstrating more of the competency than is generally exhibited. Similarly, when hesitating over a low rating, interviewers should realize it does not mean the candidate does not possess the competency; it means they did not demonstrate much of the competency in their interview responses.
2. **Leniency:** A tendency to give high ratings to all candidates, irrespective of their actual performance. There may be candidates who could benefit from further development in certain areas. Interviewers should allow their ratings to reflect these intra- and inter-individual differences.
3. **Strictness:** A tendency to give low ratings to all candidates, irrespective of their actual performance. There may be outstanding candidates whose demonstration of competencies warrants high ratings. Interviewers should allow their ratings to reflect these intra- and inter-individual differences.
4. **Anchoring:** A tendency for interviewers to place an arbitrary anchor of expectation of an candidate, which then influences their evaluation of the candidate. For example, candidates who had a high anchor of expectation were evaluated more favorably than those with a low anchor scale.

**Other Interviewing Mistakes**

1. **Homogeneous Workforce/Projection:** Too often supervisors will hire persons with similar strengths and philosophies. However, it is important to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your work group so that you identify characteristics needed to make a stronger team and to add to group synergy. Ask yourself what is the foundation base of your work group? If all employees are the same foundation base, it may be a reflection of the interview process.Supervisors also have the potential to engage in projection. Projection is the interviewer’s tendency to attribute one’s own characteristics to other people. For example, if the interviewer likes having challenging work and a lot of responsibility, then it can be often assumed that the interviewee likes that type of work environment as well. When supervisor/interviewers engage in projection it can inhibit their ability to respond to individual differences and consequently they will see the interviewees as more homogeneous than they are.
2. **Negative Emphasis:** Unfavorable information tends to be more influential and memorable than favorable information. Interviewers should avoid focusing on negative information to the exclusion of positive information.
3. **Not Knowing the Job:** Interviewers who do not have a comprehensive understanding of the skills needed for the job often form their own opinion about what constitutes the best candidate. They use this personal impression to evaluate candidates. Therefore, it is important to make sure interviewers fully understand the requirements of the job.
4. **Pressure to Hire:** When interviewers believe they need to make a decision quickly, they tend to make decisions based on a limited sample of information, or on a small number of candidate interviews. Interviewers should adhere to the established interview procedure and timeline with each candidate to avoid making erroneous decisions.
5. **Contrast Effects:** The order in which the candidates are interviewed can affect the ratings given to candidates. While making ratings, interviewers should refrain from comparing and contrasting candidates to those who have been previously interviewed.
6. **Nonverbal Behavior:** Interviewers should base their evaluation of the candidate on the candidate’s past performance and current behavior as it relates to the competency being evaluated and ***not*** just on how the candidate acts during the interview. Questions and probes relating to the competencies of interest will usually direct the interviewer to the important information.

# V. Prohibited Practices

**A. Persuading an Applicant to Decline**

Under 5 USC 2302 (b)(3)(5) it is a prohibited personnel practice to influence any person to withdraw from competition for any position for the purpose of improving or injuring the prospects of any other person for employment.

**B. Questions Giving the Appearance of Discrimination**

Interviewers may not make inquiries concerning an applicant’s race, color, religion, sex, national origin, marital status, age, sexual orientation, disability, political affiliation or other protected class.

The same general questions or topics should be covered with each applicant. For example, asking female applicants if they can travel and not asking male applicants the same question is discriminatory.

**C. Disparate Impact**

An apparent neutral practice, question, or job requirement, while applied to everyone, may be considered discriminatory because of its negative impact upon a protected group. For example, if you decide that you will only hire a person with college education from a specific group of colleges for an entry level technician position, your selection may be challenged due to disparate impact. Even though you have applied the same requirement to all applicants, it could disproportionally screen out classes of individuals who traditionally do not attend those types of colleges.

**D. Harassment**

Comments made that have the appearance of harassment leave management open to liability. Do not make any comments during the interview that is based upon race, color, religion, sex, national origin, marital status, age, sexual orientation, disability, political affiliation or other protected class.

# VI. Response to Non-selected Applicants

**A. Written Correspondence or Personal Call**

The Human Resources Office is responsible for notifying applicants when they are not selected for a position. There may be times when you have two or three particularly well-qualified applicants that you wish to notify with a personal call. However, if you call the non-selected candidates, be prepared to discuss the merits of your decision in greater detail. Be cautious about what you say to the applicant in order to avoid perceptions that you are providing them with any privileged information regarding the Job Opportunity Announcement, e.g. if they were not selected because the budget situation would not allow you to fill more than one position, don’t tell the applicant that you plan to announce another position soon.

**B. When the Applicant Calls You**

The key to responding to a non-selected applicant who calls you is to remember not to dwell on the applicant’s negatives. Do not injure the applicant’s self-esteem. Indeed, often there is nothing “wrong” with an applicant; the selectee is stronger overall for the position (do not provide specific information about the selectee or their qualifications). However, we advise you to give forthright answers to an applicant’s questions. Be honest but tactful in explaining to the applicant why they were not selected. For example, if the applicant did not have strong communication skills, tell the applicant that their communication skills could use some improvement. Remember, you have the discretion in whether you answer a question.

# VII. Reference Checks

Reference checking is a vital part of a successful hiring strategy and is primarily used to:

• Verify information provided by the candidate

• Better predict the candidate’s on-the-job success

• Gain additional knowledge (e.g., candidate’s abilities)

Reference checking aims to verify the information a candidate provided (e.g., resume) and can provide a different perspective. Both instances present a better picture to the hiring manager of how the candidate would perform on the job.

Reference checks are conducted once the applicant pool is narrowed down to the top candidate(s). For purposes of this guide, a “reference” is a person (e.g., supervisor, coworker, professor) whom the hiring manager can talk with regarding the candidate’s past performance.

## **Suggested Steps for Checking References**

Step 1

* Decide who will conduct the reference check (e.g., hiring official)
* Develop questions for references (see sample questions)

Step 2

* Inform candidates you will be checking their references and request permission if not already obtained
* Contact references
* Briefly describe the position and the duties the candidate will perform
* Contact additional references, as applicable
* Clarify with the candidate any conflicting information received by references

Step 3

* Ensure materials are stored and retained for 3 years

Additional information on reference checks can be found on OPM’s website: <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/assessment-and-selection/other-assessment-methods/referencechecking.pdf>

## **How to Conduct Reference Checks**

**Who conducts the reference checks?**

Typically, the person who will be making the final hiring decision checks the top candidates’ references.

**How many references should be contacted?**

Contacting multiple references is not required but can be beneficial to gather different perspectives on a candidate’s skills and abilities.

Candidates may provide more than one refence for the hiring manager to contact. If those references are not available, or if additional perspectives are desired, you can ask the candidate for additional references.

**Who should serve as a reference?**

The reference should have been in a position to directly observe the candidate and be of a professional nature (previous or current supervisors, coworkers, professors, etc.) and not personal (friends, relatives, etc.).

References who have had the most recent contact with the candidate may be better able to provide specific and accurate feedback. Less recent references may not be aware of new skills the candidate may have developed. On the other hand, there may be circumstances where a less recent reference has the best knowledge of the competencies that are most important for the position to be filled. Accordingly, you will need to use judgment and weigh the information references provide appropriately to the situation.

**Should I obtain a candidate's consent to check their references?**

Yes, when you ask a candidate to provide references, you should obtain their permission to contact their references. Consent can also be granted via language on the job application (e.g., a statement that all information provided by the candidate will be verified), the Declaration for Federal Employment form (**OF-306**) or a similar agency-developed form, or verbally (e.g., during the interview).

**What if the candidate asked not to contact their current supervisor?**

This is a common request (and is often an option within online staffing systems). One option is to reach out to the candidate and let them know that you are further considering them for the position and ask if their current supervisor can be contacted. In some cases, the candidate may ask for time to speak with their current supervisor which is a recommended practice.

If a candidate has asked their current supervisor not be contacted, ask the candidate to provide alternative references.

**At what point in the process should the reference check be conducted?**

The reference check should be completed prior to returning the certificate (selection) to HR who will then extend the tentative offer.

## **Developing Questions for References**

**What should I consider when planning my questions?**

Develop questions relevant to the position under consideration. For example, if the position requires the candidate to adhere to strict guidelines, asking a reference about the candidate's ability to follow work procedures might be appropriate. Ensure questions are open-ended and based on behavior the references are likely to have observed.

Consider time constraints when deciding how many questions to ask. Consider how long it will take the references to answer the questions. Keep the list of questions to a manageable number.

## **Calling References**

**How shall I contact references?**

The best way to contact a reference is usually by phone. When contacting the reference, briefly tell the reference who you are and why you are calling. Provide a brief overview of the position being filled and an estimate of how long the call will take. It may be helpful to let the reference know the candidate has given permission to have their references checked.

To ease into the conversation, begin with basic questions (e.g., reference’s relation to the candidate, candidate’s title, and dates of employment), then move on to more in-depth questions.

**What if the reference refuses to provide any information?**

Some agency (or company) policies do not allow the release of a previous employee’s information. At a minimum, most will provide start and end dates and position titles. If you are not able to get the information you are seeking, you can ask the candidate to provide another reference.

**Can I call references provided by the candidate’s references?**

A reference provided by the candidate may, in turn, refer you to other individuals who can provide additional information. Asking the candidate for consent to contact the new references demonstrates consideration for the candidate.

## **Handling Reference Information**

**What is the best way to handle the information gathered from a reference check?**

You should retain documentation of your interviews for at least three years (for DOI) or reference your agency policy for records retention so that you can justify the reasons for your selection if needed. The notes that you keep should summarize the characteristics of each applicant and show that you covered the same general topics.

While checking references, it is possible the candidate may view a situation, interaction, or goal accomplishment differently than a reference; consequently, some discrepancies may emerge. If you receive information differing from what the candidate said, it may be beneficial to allow the candidate an opportunity to clarify.

# Appendix A

# Sample Structured Interview Behavioral and Situational STAR Questions

**Behavioral Example**

**S**ituation/**T**ask probes:

Who was involved?

What factors led up to this situation?

**A**ction probes:

How did you respond?

What was your role?

**R**esult probes:

What was the outcome?

Is there anything you would have done differently?

**Situational Examples**

**S**ituation/**T**ask probes:

Why do you believe this situation occurred?

What do you consider to be the most critical issues in this situation?

**A**ction probes:

What is the first thing you would say or do?

What factors would affect your course of action?

What other actions could you take?

**R**esult probes:

How do you think your action would be received?

What do you consider as benefits of your action?

# Appendix B

# Sample Probe Questions

* What steps did you take?
* What happened after that?
* What did you say?
* How did they react?
* How did you handle that?
* What was your reaction?
* How did you feel about that?
* What was the outcome/result?
* Were you happy with that outcome/result?
* What do you wish you had done differently?
* What did you learn from that?
* How did you resolve that?
* What was the outcome of that?
* Why did you decide to do that?
* What was your reasoning?
* Where were you when this happened?
* Who else was involved?
* Tell me more about your interaction with that person.
* What was your role?
* What obstacles did you face?
* What were you thinking at that point?
* Lead me through your decision process.
* How did you prepare for that?

# Appendix C

# Sample Reference Check Questions

• In what capacity did you work with the candidate (e.g., peer, colleague, supervisor)?

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

• What were the candidate’s strengths? What were the candidate’s weaknesses or areas where the candidate could improve?

• Would you recommend them for this position? Why or why not?

• How well did the candidate know the work? How well did the candidate perform on the job? How well did the candidate manage the workload?

• How would you describe the candidate’s relationships with co-workers, subordinates, and supervisors?

• Is there anything else you can tell me about the candidate’s ability to perform their job?

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

• Is the candidate eligible for re-hire in your organization?

# Appendix D

# Sample Reference Check Form

Applicant Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date of Call: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Person Contacted: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(The selecting official must inform each reference giver of the following information) I’m contacting you to ask employment questions regarding (applicant’s name). Before I begin, I must notify you that all information, including your identity, may be disclosed to (applicant’s name) upon their request.

Reference Check Questions: (Notes: **A.** Ensure all questions asked are job related. **B.** For any questions that the reference giver does not directly answer, ask probing questions to get more information.)

1. Were you (applicant’s name)’s supervisor? (If not, clarify work role.)

2. (Applicant’s name) indicated on their resume that they held (job title) with your organization and performed the following duties (briefly describe duties as applicant described in resume). Does the job title and job description match the position that (name) held?

3. Did they have any attendance issues? For example, did (applicant’s name) miss a lot of work? Were they frequently late? Were there any issues you are aware of that impacted their job performance?

4. Describe (applicant’s name)’s interactions with management.

5. Describe their interactions with their co-workers.

6. Was their work accurate?

7. How would you describe (applicant’s name)’s productivity level?

8. Did they demonstrate initiative in completing their assignments?

9. (Selecting Official provides reference provider a brief description of the major duties of the vacant job). Would (applicant’s name) need formal training or other on-the-job training to perform these duties?

10. If the opportunity arose, would you rehire this person?

11. Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to share with me?