

How to Conduct Effective Reference Checks

Background and reference checks help verify the accuracy of the information that candidates provided during the selection process. As needed, these checks can verify an applicant's qualifications or the selection committee's assessment of the candidate's skills and abilities.

- 1) **Ask your top candidate to provide you with references.** This should be done as the final stage in your selection process, to verify your assessment rather than to help make a decision. To confirm your assessment of the candidate, ask for at least 3 diverse employment references, which may include:
 - A manager or supervisor
 - A direct report
 - A colleague
 - A client/customer
 - A community partner
- 2) **Obtain written consent to check.** It is important that you gain written permission to contact the employment references a candidate provides. Ask the candidate to sign or initial the document they provide with the names and contact numbers. Alternatively, ask them to complete the FIPPA - Reference Checks form.
- 3) **Determine 'gaps' in your assessment.** Each reference check will be different and tailored toward the specific information you would like to verify about the candidate. Any gaps or uncertainties you identified throughout your assessment process are points to raise in the reference process (e.g., the candidate seems to exhibit a slight resistance to change).

All of your questions, however, must be related to the skills and competencies required for the job. As with the interview process, any questions surrounding the following grounds are not permissible:

race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, record of offences, marital status, family status and disability

Hiring decisions based on any of the above grounds are illegal, according to the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

For more information, refer to the **Appropriate and Inappropriate Human Rights-Related Questions** tip sheet

- 4) **Use your interview questions as a basis.** Behaviour-based interview questions can effectively be re-developed into reference check questions. In this way, you can ask the referee to recall a specific example that demonstrates the candidate's competency in a particular area. Similarly, you can ask the referee to comment on the example the candidate provided in the interview, thereby obtaining a second opinion/evaluation on the behaviour they exhibited in that situation.
- 5) **Take detailed notes.** As you speak with the referee, write down what their exact words – not your interpretation of what they have said. These notes should be kept on file with the rest of your selection process documentation for at least one year in case of any complaints to the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario (HRTO).