# Tool on Biases and Barriers in Reference Checks

This tool is for human resources specialists and hiring managers who are using reference checks for personnel selection. It contains a step-by-step method to identify biases and barriers, including ways to mitigate their impact.

More information can be found in the:

* Guide on Biases and Barriers in Assessments that presents 6 guiding principles for fair assessment and how to conduct an evaluation of biases and barriers
* Tool on Biases and Barriers in Assessments (Any Method) where you will find additional biases, barriers and mitigation strategies common to many assessment methods

## What are reference checks?

Reference checks are assessments of a person’s competencies, past performance or accomplishments via interactions with people who know them (for example, former supervisor or colleague). For more information, see the Public Service Commission’s guide on [Structured Reference Checking: A User’s Guide to Best Practices](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/public-service-hiring-guides/structured-reference-checks.html).

## Step 1: Describe your reference check method

Reflect on the 6 guiding principles and how they can be applied (Awareness of Self and Others, Accessibility, Validity and Reliability, Flexible Standardization, Transparency, and Fairness).

Note key aspects of your reference check method or indicate where the information can be found. This can include the qualifications and how they will be evaluated, the administration process, the rating system, and the people who will be involved.

## Step 2: Identify biases and barriers in reference checks

Below is a list of potential sources of biases and barriers that may apply to different stages of reference checks. Check for those that could apply.

### When planning the reference check

* **Assessment criteria are not clearly communicated:** If candidates do not know what the reference check will assess it can be difficult to select suitable and appropriate referees. This can result in incomplete responses that could be misinterpreted as low scores.
* **Limited number and choice of referees:** People can be uneasy about asking for a reference. Sometimes there are not enough suitable people to ask, or the referees did not have the opportunity to observe the target behaviours. For example, if a person was self-employed, they might withdraw their application if they are not given flexibility in who to choose for their reference.
* **Requiring current or recent supervisors:** People may be uncomfortable asking a current supervisor to serve as their referee if they believe it may negatively impact their current employment. People may also be unable to ask a recent supervisor if they were on a prolonged leave (medical, family or other reasons).
* **Disregarding experience acquired abroad:** It may be hard to contact and communicate with referees abroad. A referee may not speak fluently in English or French. However, omitting this referee might lead you to miss valuable information about the person being assessed.
* **References can pose barriers if it is the only method used to assess a qualification:** The reference check can pose many biases and barriers that are not within the control of the candidate or assessment board. The assessment board may not capture an accurate view of a person’s qualification by relying heavily on a reference check.

### When administering and scoring the reference check

* **Referee bias:** Referees might have their own personal biases and preconceptions of a good employee that can influence their evaluation of a person. Moreover, a person might have been performing below expectation in their past job if their supervisor failed to provide adequate work accommodations.
* **Incomplete responses and lack of probing:** Referees may give incomplete answers if they did not have the opportunity to observe the target behaviours. Referees may also give answers that are too general, making it hard for the board to assign accurate ratings. This is more of a risk for written responses if there is no follow-up to missing information.
* **Unclear process or expectations:** The reference process can be different in the public and private sectors. This can disadvantage external candidates if they are not explicitly told what is expected and how to select and prepare referees. Referees may not give enough information if expectations are unclear.
* **Too much personal discussion:** While building some rapport can put people at ease, too much small talk may introduce undesired biases. Board members might form impressions of the candidate via their referees that influence the evaluation.
* **Insufficient note taking:** Relying on memory, paraphrasing or summarizing responses is prone to bias. Taking detailed notes of what the person said can reduce rating errors.

### Other biases or barriers

* If other potential sources of biases or barriers for your assessment method have been identified, consider documenting them.

## Step 3: Take action to mitigate biases and barriers in reference checks

Below is a list of potential actions to help mitigate biases and barriers in reference checks. Note that some strategies may not be feasible or appropriate to apply in all instances. Check all the relevant mitigation strategies put in place.

### When planning the reference check

#### Developing reference check content

* Show flexibility by being open to various referees (that is, colleague, employee, client) that can attest to the person’s qualification. Consider preparing appropriate questions for different referees (action management questions for supervisors and client orientation questions for clients)
* Establish a way to contact and validate reference checks for a referee who lives abroad or who does not speak English or French
* Prepare an alternate method of assessment if a referee is unavailable or unreachable
* Use the reference check only to confirm or supplement information gathered from other assessment methods
* Prepare a rating booklet for the assessment board that includes the qualifications, rating criteria, sample elements of effective responses and space for taking notes

#### Information to give to candidates

* Provide information about the process in advance and the purpose for conducting a reference check, including the qualifications that will be assessed
* Provide another valid assessment option if someone does not want to move forward with a reference check (see possible scenarios in the guide on [Flexibility in Assessment](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/appointment-framework/guides-tools-appointment-framework/flexibility-in-assessment.html#t2))
* Provide recommendations on how to select referees
* Ask for multiple referees

#### Information to give to referees

* Provide information about the process in advance, including the format, the time allotted, and the qualifications being assessed
* Provide the questions in advance and give referees enough time to prepare their answers
* Offer referees options for them to provide the information (verbally or in writing)
* Place focus on factual information and observed behaviour rather than generalities or impressions

### When administering the reference check

* Ask the same questions for each qualification to referees
* Take detailed notes of what the referee says rather than paraphrasing
* Use follow-up questions to gather complete information (who, what, when, where, why, how). Avoid prompting questions that lead towards a desired answer
* Do not penalize a candidate if their referee is unavailable or does not follow instructions
* Ensure you are assessing the candidate rather than the quality of response from their referee
* Follow-up with referees or ask for an additional referee if information is inconsistent or missing

### When scoring the reference check

* Use the detailed notes to support the ratings
* Do not render a rating if information is insufficient. Label this response as “unable to observe” instead of a pass or fail
* Consider information gathered from other tools when combined with other methods (for example, interview)
* Take note of all evidence in support of ratings or concerns raised during the reference check

### Other actions

* The list of mitigation strategies above is not exhaustive. If you have taken any other actions to mitigate biases or barriers in your assessment method, consider documenting them.

You have now completed your evaluation and have made reasonable efforts to remove or mitigate biases and barriers. Keep in mind that you want to conduct assessments of candidates as planned to reduce the risk of unforeseen biases or barriers. Consider putting in place strategies to deal with any testing issues, test incidents or unforeseen biases and barriers. You can also gather feedback after the assessments (from candidates, board members, etc.) to learn and share about how to conduct fair assessments.