Reference checks are a valuable tool for gathering information on applicants and an essential part of the selection process. Through reference checks, hiring authorities are able to:

- confirm any information and details on the application materials;
- check for any prior discipline problems;
- learn new information about a candidate; and
- ask questions that may predict a candidate's performance.

Conducting reference checks can be a difficult task for primarily two reasons. First, many organization have policies that prohibit managers from providing reference checks. This, in many cases, limits the information from a former employer to name, title and dates of employment. Second, references tend to emphasize a candidate's good points and down play the bad points, resulting in an excessively positive or inflated reference. However, these difficulties do not minimize the importance or need for conducting reference checks.

The process of conducting reference checks has three stages:

1. Pre-Reference Check
2. The Reference Check
3. Post-Reference Check

The purpose of this guide is to provide tips in conducting effective reference checks in each of these stages, and attempting to resolve the difficulties mentioned above.

Stage 1: Pre-Reference Check

Check reference on only those candidates under serious consideration after screening interviews. Although important, reference checks take time. Minimize the time spent on the selection process by only checking references of your top candidate(s).

Inform the candidate that you plan to contact references. This is typically done during the interview when the candidate provides a list of references. However, do not limit yourself to the references listed; make sure that you talk with most former employers, especially those in which the candidate held a position similar to the position for which the candidate was interviewed. If the candidate does not want you to contact a certain employer, you need to explore the reasons with the candidate.

Review the candidate's resume. Make sure that you understand the position that the candidate held while employed with each of the references. This will allow you to verify the information provided by the candidate with the information provided by the reference. In addition, review employment dates, job responsibilities and achievements to determine if there are any questions you have in those areas.

Prepare your questions before contacting any references.

- **Focus your questions to verifiable job-related information.** Just as with interview questions for candidates, make sure that the questions are appropriate and do not violate company policy, provincial/territorial and federal law. In addition, asking job-related questions increases the likelihood of receiving useful data.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Avoid questions that can be answered with 'yes' and 'no' answers. Ask questions that will require the reference to expand on the information requested.
- **Use behavioural-based interview questions.** Adapt the questions from the candidate's interview to receive more specific information about the candidate's skills.
- **Ask questions about any 'red flags' from the candidate interview.** If you have any questions that were raised or inconsistent information after the candidate interview, make sure to ask a question to address that specific issue.

Check references by phone. Written responses to reference checks rarely uncover negative factors. People hesitate to put in writing information they might give on the phone. This allows you to ask clarification questions and to guide the reference into different avenues depending on how the person giving the information is reacting to the questions being asked. Do not let letters of reference substitute for phone calls.

Contact former and current supervisors as they are the best sources of information. If the candidate does not want you to contact a certain employer, you need to explore the reasons with the candidate. If the candidate indicates that the current supervisor should not be contacted, inform the candidate that the lack of the current supervisor's reference may affect the hiring decision.

Use the same general questions if you are contacting references for more than one candidate. As with any step in the recruitment and selection process, it is important to treat all candidates equally.

Stage 2: The Reference Check

Introduce yourself. Identify yourself, explain your position in the company and tell the reference why you are calling. Be friendly but professional. Resist any attempt to refer you to Human Resources unless the supervisor says their policy absolutely forbids giving references.

Build rapport with the reference. Many times a freer exchange of information comes about when the reference identifies with you, the company, your position or some mutual point of interest.

Give the reference an idea of how many questions you have and ask if the reference has time to talk to you. Make sure that the reference has the time needed to provide the information you need. Be sensitive to the reference's time, even if this requires scheduling a later time and date.

Let the reference talk freely for as long as he or she wishes. Make sure that you have scheduled enough time to effectively conduct the reference check.

Show empathy. For example, instead of asking "how was the candidate's attendance?" ask "We've all had times when we were late? How often was the candidate late?"

Follow up and probe when you feel the reference is reluctant to discuss certain factors. Sometimes you may have the feeling that the reference is not providing you with the whole story. If, after asking additional questions, you still feel there is something else you should know, be direct and say "I get the feeling you are not telling me something, is there something I should know about this individual?"

Be alert for non-verbal hints when you ask questions. What's the tone of the reference's voice? Are there hesitations or pauses, even sigh? These are often a sign that additional questions in that area may bring further information you might not otherwise have received.

Take notes. Keep legible and complete notes of the reference's comments as they are critical when the time comes to evaluate the information and the candidates.

Do not rate the candidate while gathering information. The primary goal of the reference check is to collect information. Rating the candidate during the reference check may distract from other valuable information. There will be time to rate the candidate when all of the information is gathered.

Stage 3: Post-Reference Check

Do not accept all of the information at face value; look at the context in which it was given.

Do not base a decision to hire solely on information received from a reference check. It is best to use the information from a combination of different methods such as the resume or application, interview and reference checks.

Contact additional references if you are in doubt about a candidate's qualifications.

Evaluate the quality of the information gathered, especially if there is an impression that the reference was not being entirely frank. You are looking for factual information. Do not accept opinions or qualitative answers in lieu of evidence.

Look for patterns of evidence or inconsistent evidence. If you receive information that is inconsistent with other information you have, continue to ask questions until you feel you have resolved the inconsistency.

Ensure that information received is weighted in the same way for all candidates for which reference checks were completed. What disqualifies one candidate should be the basis for disqualifying any candidate.

Maintain documentation. Document the information gathered from your reference checks, noting even those reference requests from which you obtained no information. The documentation will be part of the official recruitment file.