



Merit Selection - Good Practice Guidelines

Good Practice Approach to Merit Selection

In conjunction with all NTPS agencies, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment has commenced a review of recruitment and selection practices. The purpose of the review is to encourage a more flexible and streamlined approach to selection which emphasises compliance with the merit principle, rather than following rigid, formulaic processes.

It is apparent that within the NTPS a number of recruitment myths currently exist, and are being followed as rules, often without regard to whether or not they apply to the circumstances of a particular vacancy. These 'good practice' guidelines are designed to assist selection panels in debunking some of these myths, and in understanding that a selection process does not comply with the merit principle simply because it follows a set process.

These guidelines do not replace or contradict the existing Merit Selection Guide, Employment Instructions, Determinations, or Agencies' own policies, and are intended to be applied in conjunction with them. None of the ideas or concepts presented here are contrary to the existing statutory framework, although the approach does challenge many of the myths about selection.

Debunking the Myths

The following table sets out some facts about selection and also the contrary myths that exist in relation to those facts.

Fact	Myth
Merit-based selection processes can be flexible and designed to suit the circumstances of the vacancy. The only requirement is that merit is adequately and impartially assessed.	All selection processes must follow an identical set process.
The pillars of selection are the components of merit: knowledge, skills, qualification and experience, and potential for future development.	The pillars of selection are "application, interview and referees".
Written job applications assist selection panels in deciding which applicants warrant further consideration. Therefore it is consistent with the merit principle for applicants to be considered on the basis of only a CV and covering letter, or for incumbents and existing employees to submit only brief applications or expressions of interest.	Applicants cannot be considered for a job unless they have submitted a lengthy written application specifically addressing each selection criteria. Written applications themselves are measures of merit and applicants must be rated on the quality of their applications and whether the application contains good examples of outcomes achieved.



Fact	Myth
It is not compulsory to conduct interviews in a selection process. Interviews should be regarded as one possible assessment tool.	There must be an interview in every selection process – even in situations where there is only one applicant or where someone has been acting in a position.
An interview is valuable in exploring issues specific to the merit of a particular applicant. Accordingly, identical questions do not need to be asked of all applicants.	Applicants must be asked identical questions at interview and then rated on the basis of who gives the best answers on the day.
An applicant for a job is entitled to expect that their proven work history and the knowledge a panel member already has about their merit (based on demonstrated work performance) will inform the selection process.	A member of the selection panel cannot bring ‘personal’ knowledge of the applicant’s work performance to the selection process other than by a pre-submitted written referee report.
Information obtained from referees is one of the most useful ways of verifying applicants’ actual capacity to perform. For this reason, the persons best-placed to provide current and relevant information about an applicant should be contacted and thoroughly canvassed about an applicant’s knowledge, skills, experience and potential.	Only nominated referees can be contacted. Referees can only be asked to comment on the specific selection criteria and nothing further. Referees should only be contacted in relation to applicants who have done well at interview.
General referee comments can be included as part of selection and individual reports, and only seriously damaging comments, which of themselves could lead to an adverse decision, have to be put to the applicant for a response prior to the decision being made.	All referee reports have to be put into writing and signed by referees and then given separately to the applicant. Any comment, no matter how minor, which could be perceived as negative must be provided to the applicant.
Individual selection reports should provide enough information, including comparison with the successful applicant, to enable applicants to fully understand the decision.	Individual selection reports cannot contain any comparative information about the successful applicant and can only be about the individual.

Many of the myths outlined in the chart above are ingrained and hard to shift from the minds of some selection panels. However, in order to achieve change to more flexible, efficient and meaningful selection processes, different approaches are needed. The remainder of this guideline discusses the merit principle and its application, and ways in which beneficial change can be implemented.

The Merit Principle

Selection must be based on the merit principle which is that:

“An appointment, promotion or transfer should be on the basis of, and only on the basis of the capacity of the person to perform particular duties, having regard to the person’s knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience and the potential for future development of the person in employment in the Public Sector.”

In other words, merit is the overall ability of a person to perform a job, taking into account:

- knowledge
- skills
- qualifications and experience
- potential for future development

These factors are the true ‘pillars of recruitment’ in applying the merit principle, not, as is commonly believed, “application, interview and referees”, which are simply assessment tools, and not the only ones, which can be used to assess merit, if those tools suit the circumstances.

Merit Selection Guide

Part 10 of [Employment Instruction No.1](#) deals with Advertising, Selection, Appointment, Transfer and Promotion and states that all employees involved in the selection process should refer to Agency selection procedures and to the [Merit Selection Guide](#) which provides the principles and guidelines for the filling of vacancies in the NTPS. The Merit Selection Guide:

- is flexible, practical, non-prescriptive, and does not require specific processes to be followed
- does not set out any hard and fast rules for assessing merit or running selection processes
- specifically states that the assessment process “is chosen to suit the circumstances of the vacancy and the business environment in which it operates”.

Although the Merit Selection Guide sets out this flexible approach, NTPS selection processes tend to follow an inflexible formula, with reliance on written applications and interview performance, rather than actual demonstrated capacity to perform the job.

Selection panels need to be aware that assessment of merit can be conducted in any manner that demonstrates that an applicant’s knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience and the potential for future development were adequately considered and fairly assessed. This can include taking into account the demonstrated performance of a person who has been acting in the vacant position, and relying upon knowledge of work history as possibly the best indicator of a person’s merit.



Employment Instructions and guidelines for selection can be found on the [OCPE website](http://www.ocpe.nt.gov.au/ntps_careers/recruiting_employees) and at http://www.ocpe.nt.gov.au/ntps_careers/recruiting_employees

Selection Processes

The selection process is an investigation. In order to assess an applicant, information in that investigation may be collected through a variety of strategies, with no set process or format required. What this means is that:

- referees can be contacted at any stage including when assessing applications
- there is no requirement to conduct an interview and interviews are only one type of assessment tool which could be used if needed or valuable in the investigation. Some agencies do require an interview in all cases and this is their decision.
- other assessment methods may be used to gather evidence, e.g. prior to interview canvassing referees best placed to have direct knowledge about an applicant's demonstrated work performance, obtaining samples of work, conducting practical tests or providing scenarios and seeking responses
- a selection panel can stop investigating when confident they can make an informed decision about the best person for the job. This means, for example, that if there is an applicant whose work history and referee reports confirm their superiority, it would be a waste of time and effort to continue a selection process in regard to that person, just to be seen to have done it.
- the panel must be able to justify their selection by providing an assessment report which makes it clear exactly what aspects of the applicant's knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience, and potential have resulted in the conclusion of superior merit. Selection reports should not simply say such things as "Meets to a High Level", "Meets", "Meets Marginally" but rather should give an explanation of the knowledge, skills, experience and qualifications and potential which has caused the panel to conclude someone "Meets" a criterion.

Interviews (Employment Discussions)

The Merit Guide states that selection panels should not place an over-reliance on an applicant's performance at interview, however, sector wide there is a tendency to do this in general practice.

Good practice is that interviews should be looked upon as a discussion used to explore issues specific to particular applicants, not as a process to ask a series of identical questions and then 'rate' the applicants on the quality of their answers. Conducting interviews as discussions also provides an opportunity for applicants to find out more about the job – in other words interviews are structured to allow for an exchange of information, not as a test to see who responds best on the day.

If an interview is used as part of the assessment process, panels should have a clear purpose for the interview and for the questions asked. On this basis, questions do not have to be the same for each applicant, and it is possible to interview some short-listed applicants and not others. To interview or not is a judgement call for panels based on which methodology they feel they need to use to make an informed assessment about a particular applicant.

The Merit Selection Guide states that:

The purpose of an interview is for the panel to explore the applicant's claims against the selection criteria in order to obtain further information to consider in their assessment. An interview is only one method of assessment that may form part of the total assessment process and the panel should not place an over-reliance on an applicant's performance at interview.

Some considerations for panels:

- Do they need further information about a particular applicant that they can only gain through interview, or do they have other, perhaps better, sources such as referees?
- What meaningful information will a panel gather from interviewing someone who has already been working in the job, or whose capacity to perform is already well known to the agency through demonstrated on-the-job performance?
- Is it sensible, or useful, to ask the same questions of someone already working in a job as you might want to ask someone from outside the public service, or from another area?
- Some groups, such as Indigenous persons, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, persons with disabilities, shy, modest persons and older women and men, may be disadvantaged by the interview process.
- The interview environment can be very daunting and stressful for some interviewees and their performance may not be indicative of their actual communication skills or capacity to do a job
- Some people can promote themselves excellently at interview, but good interview performance does not automatically mean the person is the best person for the job.
- Panels seeking answers or key points to generic prepared questions often do not sufficiently explore applicant's merit but instead simply assume that the person's failure to provide the answer expected confirms that they are unsuitable.



Job Descriptions

[Determination 4 of 2006](#) determines the format of Job Descriptions used by NTPS agencies “for recruitment purposes.” The Determination requires recruitment job descriptions to detail selection criteria which are a list of “qualifications, abilities, skills and personal qualities required to achieve the outcomes of the job.” These criteria are limited to no more than ten and they may be broad or specific depending on the nature of the job and its responsibilities.

The intention of Determination 4 was to simplify job descriptions for recruitment purposes in order to make them clearer and more succinct. Current NTPS practices tend towards complex criteria and to identifying too many criteria as being essential. Bearing in mind that if a criteria is listed as essential a successful applicant absolutely must meet it, then, other than truly essential skills or qualifications (e.g. ability to use a computer, driver’s licence, accounting skills, management/leadership experience, medical or legal training, etc) thought should be given to keeping ‘essential’ criteria to a minimum. A context statement added to a job description is also useful for identifying which of the selection criteria, and which aspects of components of merit, will be given greater weight in assessing overall capacity to perform particular duties.

Good practice is to list fewer, and more general, selection criteria and let the panel decide what weight to give the various aspects of a person’s merit (skills, experience, qualifications, knowledge, and potential for future development) when considering their capacity to perform the overall requirements for the job. Also selection criteria should, where appropriate, be framed in a way that allows for consideration of future potential for development in assessing merit. Examples of ways of doing this might be to include phrases in selection criteria such as:

“or the demonstrated ability to quickly acquire this knowledge..”

“or similar experience in a related area”,

“other skills and knowledge which would be readily transferable”

Job Applications

NTPS selection panels tend to place too much emphasis on how a job application is written, rather than simply using applications, as the Merit Selection Guide contemplates, as a source of information to help identify who should be given further consideration in a selection process.

An applicant does not necessarily meet all the selection criteria simply because they have done a good job of claiming that in their application. Conversely there may be situations in which it is apparent that an applicant (particularly one from outside the NTPS) meets a criterion, even if they have not provided an example setting out a specific “situation, task, action and result”, or otherwise explained in detail in writing how they meet the individual criteria. Selection processes could be significantly streamlined, for both applicants and panels, if requests were made for much shorter applications, attaching a CV setting-out work history and background, and focusing on the overall job requirements, rather than requiring applicants to separately address every one of the selection criteria.



Because the function of an application is to attract the attention of the panel, it is a significant amount of effort for 'in-house' applicants and incumbents, and for the selection panel who has to read them, to require of those applicants the same sort of lengthy written applications that we expect from applicants who are unknown to the panel. An applicant who has already demonstrated, by actually doing a job over a period of time, that they meet the selection criteria, should not have to write a lengthy application to convince the panel of that fact.

Selection panels should also bear in mind that: *"Merit-based selection is not an application-writing contest"* (2008 PAB decision), and that a written application is essentially just the unverified claims of the applicant, and thus should not be used as an indicator of merit without further exploration and verification through referee reports and knowledge of actual work performance.

Performance-Based Assessment

The best source for accurate assessment of an applicant's merit is their known and demonstrated work history. Any employee should be able to rely on the fact that their day-to-day performance on the job will be taken into account when they are being considered in a selection process.

This of course puts a greater emphasis on performance feedback in the workplace – a selection process is not the place for an employee to find out they are not doing their job to the level that would warrant promotion. For example – all too often an agency may be well aware that someone temporarily acting in a position is not yet ready for promotion, but still "gives them an interview anyhow", on the basis that they would be "upset not to be even granted an interview." This approach not only reinforces the concept that jobs are won or lost based on interview performance, but also reflects a poor approach to managing employees and providing meaningful feedback. Just as an employee who has performed well in a job should expect that will act in their favour, similarly, a person who has demonstrated they are not up to the standard to warrant promotion, should be told that through a proper process of regular performance feedback, rather than being put through a token selection process to deliver that message.

Guidance and information about performance management is provided in Employment Instruction 4, which sets out the minimum requirements for development and implementation of performance management systems in agencies. It states that: "Effective performance management is designed to enhance performance, identify performance requirements, provide feedback relevant to those requirements and assist with career development." Good management practice is to give regular feedback, both positive and negative, to assist employees in career development and to assist in managing poor performance.



The Importance of Referees

Because one of the best sources for assessing the merit of applicants is their demonstrated relevant work history and performance, referee reports become very important in best-practice selection process, since it is through the knowledge of supervisors and managers, and sometimes co-workers and subordinates, that on-the-job performance and capabilities can be verified.

Culturally there is often a reluctance to rely upon referee reports and a tendency to assume that referee reports are not that meaningful, because a referee is a person who “says good things about someone”. This concern is not an issue if selection panels understand that they should seek from a referee the specific information and verification that they need to make their assessment. There is no limit when it comes to gathering enough information to make an assessment, and panels should feel free to speak to as many referees as they think is necessary and ask any questions about work performance and merit that they need answered.

Panels often follow a practice of asking all referees the same questions or asking referees only to make comments against the specific selection criteria. While this may give some information, it is often generic information which does not allow the panel to fully explore or clarify information. Panels should contact referees directly, and ensure that, to assist in obtaining meaningful information, they convey to the referees details about the requirements of the job, the operating environment, and which aspects of the selection criteria are most important. The panel should then ask referees for full and accurate information relating to the applicant knowledge, skills, experience and potential. And, in situations where referees have supervised more than one of the applicants, comparative comment about each applicant’s merit will be most useful to the panel in making the selection decision.

A Message from the Commissioner for Public Employment

*If an NTPS employee has been promoted to a position where they are supervising and managing staff, then it becomes part of their job, as well as a requirement under 17.6 of the Code of Conduct, for them to give **fair, frank, complete, honest and accurate** information about work performance as part of any NTPS selection process involving their staff.*

In using referee reports a Panel should:

- seek information from as many referees as are needed to form a complete assessment of the applicant
- ascertain the relationship of the referee in relation to the applicant – e.g. their position in relation to the applicant, how long have they been in that role, whether they are the person best-placed to provide meaningful information about an applicant’s merit

- develop specific questions for the referees of each applicant, focussing on the skills, knowledge, experience and potential of the particular applicant in relation to the position
- contact nominated and/or non-nominated referees (after advising the applicant if a non-nominated referee is going to be contacted), and generally, to ensure natural justice, contact a nominated referee if a non-nominated referee has also been contacted

and must:

- Ensure applicants have right of reply to seriously damaging comments made by referees, nominated or not, and that any response is impartially considered before an adverse decision is made.

The Merit Selection Guide recommends that the panel make direct contact with referees and this is good practice, since it gives the panel the ability to explore issues relating to an applicant's merit and thoroughly canvass the referee. If a panel decides to employ recruitment consultants to conduct referee checks, the strongly recommended practice, due to the panel not personally contacting referees, would be to have the consultant obtain referee reports **prior** to any interview of the applicant. This allows the selection panel to use the expertise of trained recruitment consultants in obtaining comprehensive referee information, which could then be discussed and explored with an applicant in the interview. In this way using consultants or using the practice of contacting referees prior to any interview, can enhance the process and ensure that selection panels haven't made up their mind prior to even contacting referees.

There is no requirement that referee reports must be in writing or signed off by referees. However, referees should be told that their general comments may form part of the individual report, and that any strongly negative comments which might result in the candidate not being selected, will be passed on to the applicant to obtain their response.

Selection Reports

The current process for writing selection reports is often cumbersome, time-consuming, not meaningful to applicants, and a major contributing factor to the long delays in finalising selection processes.

A more efficient and meaningful approach to writing selection reports, is to use a 'narrative' style which sets out reasons why the successful applicant was found to have more merit in terms of knowledge, skills, qualifications/experience, and potential for future development, and incorporating referee comments in the body of the report rather than as a separate document. (It is not necessary to provide applicants with copies of referee reports – panels just need to make it clear to referees that their general comments will be incorporated in the individual report.)

A sample of one possible template for Selection Reports, as developed in a workshop on selection processes, is attached. This template foregoes the common practice of writing individual paragraphs against each criterion in favour of a more informative general comment approach, focussing on knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience and potential. Other recommended changes to Selection Report templates is that they do not state short listing is only for interview, but rather that short-listing identifies applicants who warrant “further consideration”. This will make it clearer to panels that they should not automatically interview all applicants, but instead reflect on whether an interview is needed to assess a particular applicant.

Of all changes suggested for any newly designed agency Selection Report templates the most important is that selection templates should specifically include the definition of merit, and direct selection panels to indicate in their report how they have assessed applicants having regard to their “knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience, and potential for future development.” (The strongly recommended changes to selection templates are highlighted in yellow on the attached sample template.)

Individual Reports

The best Individual Report should be one that answers all the questions the unsuccessful applicant might have. Good feedback on the reasons for non-selection is important and can go a long way in increasing unsuccessful applicants’ satisfaction with the process and in avoiding appeals or grievances. Written feedback in an individual report is best, (because oral feedback is often not really quite as complete as the giver thinks it is, or as completely understood by the recipient hearing it as would be ideal.) The report should be meaningful and of genuine assistance to unsuccessful applicants in understanding why they were not successful.

Note: There is no rule that written Individual Reports cannot include comparative information explaining exactly why the successful applicant was assessed to be of superior merit. Particularly in the case of applicants who meet all the criteria, it is far more helpful for them to be told why the successful applicant was found to be better than it is to simply give them a long report telling them that they met each criterion. This does not mean that successful applicants must be identified by name in others Individual Reports. They can simply be referred to as “the successful applicant.”

Thought might also be given as to whether or not it is necessary to rate applicants as “unsuitable” (which can have a very demoralising and devastating effect on employees). Better practice may be to simply point out the areas in which an applicant needs to develop, or has not achieved the same level as the successful applicant. This practice is based on the concept that a selection process should not be used as a performance management tool, and that good management practice is that employees should not be learning for the first time in a selection process that they are regarded by their employer as unsuitable for promotion.



Conclusion

Merit based selection processes do not have to follow a set process, and the only absolute requirement is that the selection method used adequately and impartially assesses the capacity of the applicant to do the job, having regard to that person's knowledge, skills, qualifications and experience, and their potential for future development in employment in the Public Sector.

To discuss these Guidelines, or to request further information about selection processes, please contact Promotion Appeals & Grievance Reviews on 8999 4128 or email pab.ocpe@nt.gov.au