

7 tips for chairing selection panels

by Jane Melross, Principal Consultant, The Write Solution

Running a selection process in government can be daunting, especially when you haven't done it before. The first time I chaired a panel was during a massive organisational restructure almost 20 years ago. Until then, the only other selection panel I'd experienced was the one that interviewed me for the job! Fortunately I had a supportive manager who guided me through the process and since then I've participated in more than 200 selection panels.

This is the list of tips I wish I'd had that first time (please make sure you also refer to your own Human Resource department's policies and procedures).

1. Planning the process

While recruitment in government is inevitably lengthy, some processes drag on for too long, often at the expense of excellent candidates. Planning can help minimise the likelihood of this kind of disappointment.

Planning should start as soon as you start reviewing a position's Statement of Duties. You should already be thinking about the type of person you would like to be in the job, as well as their skills and capability. Consider who will add value to your selection panel and the skills they will bring to the process – and once you've decided, check whether they are likely to be available. You can also be thinking about the types of questions you will need to ask to find the right person.

Set out a timeline that includes when the position is advertised, when applications will close, when you need the panel to shortlist applications and when you intend to run interviews. While many details can't be finalised until you know how many applications you have, you can send tentative appointments to your panel members and book rooms in advance to minimise the chance of delays later.

2. Setting up the interviews

You're the face of your organisation in your interactions with potential candidates. A negative experience for a candidate can impact on your agency's reputation, so all of your interactions with potential candidates should be professional and welcoming.

While candidates are generally invited by telephone to attend an interview, it's useful to follow up with an email that provides important details such as the date, time and location (and directions if this isn't straightforward or the candidate isn't local), the approximate duration, what they should do on arrival and the names of the panel members. If you are providing the interview questions in advance, let the candidate know how this will be managed.

At the start of every interview, introduce the panel members and outline the process and interview format. Cover any other relevant introductory details including what the job is (seriously, someone I worked with couldn't understand why she was being asked finance questions when she'd applied for a job as an editor – it turned out they'd invited her to the wrong interview!). Advise the interviewee that they will have the opportunity to ask questions or provide more information at the end.

3. Assessing the candidates

It's important that your panel understands from the start what is expected of them when assessing candidates. It's a good idea to have a brief meeting early in the process, perhaps when you're distributing the applications received, to brief the panel on the process, the background to the job and the type of person you're looking for. Outline the scoring process that you're intending to use means you're all speaking the same language. It can be useful to give your panel a shortlisting matrix they can use to assess and score each candidate. Generally, once the panel members have individually assessed the candidates, they will reconvene to determine which candidates should be interviewed.

Prior to interviews, explain to the panel how you would like them to score candidates during the interview and when you intend to discuss each candidate's responses. Often an initial discussion occurs between each interview so that you (or the scribe) can capture the panel's thoughts while they're fresh. A broader comparative discussion takes place at the end of all of the interviews where initial scores can be refined.

4. Assess the criteria – not the questions

A common mistake made by selection panels is to assess a candidate's responses against the question they were asked in the interview instead of against the selection criteria.

It's important to keep in mind that the outcome of a recruitment process is a selection report that evaluates how each candidate performed against the selection criteria. While a candidate's responses to the interview questions are a critical part of this evaluation, you must assess the criteria and how all the information available to you – the interview responses, the application and referee reports (if applicable) – demonstrate the candidate's capability.

Having the selection report in mind when you are developing the questions can be helpful. For example, for a criterion that asks for "problem solving, initiative and creativity", a candidate may not mention their problem solving skills if asked for "an example of when they applied their creativity". Selection panels can fall into the trap of claiming in the selection report that a candidate didn't have particular skills just because they weren't mentioned at interview. Don't forget you can ask a candidate follow up questions if there is an aspect of the criterion they haven't covered (as long as you provide the same opportunity for all candidates). For a free copy of *How to write an effective selection report* contact us at resources@thewritesolution.com.au

5. Get some external support

Using an external expert can take the pressure off the selection panel chair. Writing a selection report that complies with Government policies can be time consuming, especially if you haven't done it before or you don't do that sort of thing very often. A good scribe will provide you with a compliant report within a few days of interview and also help develop your questions and even undertake referee checks for you.

The Office of the State Service Commission (OSSC) supports the use of scribes who they say can 'minimise the time taken to complete selection reports'. The OSSC also says that 'scribes can also provide a more complete service throughout the selection process including shortlisting applicants, assisting with interviews, sitting on the panel and obtaining referee reports' (Office of the State Service Commission, *Tasmanian State Service Evaluation Report 2010: Recruitment in the State Service*, p38). If your budget allows it, using scribes can be very cost effective.

6. Don't be afraid of a debrief

While the thought of debriefing an unsuccessful candidate can be daunting, most people are simply seeking feedback so they can improve for their next job interview. Treating a debrief as a way to help them improve can make it a positive experience. If a candidate calls you for feedback, it's a good idea to take the person's details and call them back. This gives you time to collect your thoughts and review any relevant information prior to talking to them. It also reduces the likelihood of you saying something off the cuff that could be inflammatory. Rather than reading the whole selection report to them word-for-word, giving the person a balanced report about the strengths and weakness of their performance can be useful. Don't forget to be sensitive about how you talk about any weaknesses.

Candidates who weren't shortlisted can also ask for feedback, so it's useful to have good notes from your shortlisting process.

7. If you're not sure, ask

It's in the best interest of your organisation to make sure you recruit the right person. Your HR department is a wealth of information and can help you if you face any difficult situations or questions.



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Jane has assisted more than 200 government selection panels with their recruitment. Jane worked with the Tasmanian Government for eleven years. She managed the WorkCover Safety Awards from their inception in 1996 and was a founding member of the national committee that initiated the Safe Work Australia Awards. Prior to this Jane worked in television production and the casino industry in Tasmania and South Australia.

Jane has tertiary degrees in teaching and information studies and a graduate certificate of management. She is a member of the Australian Institute of Human Resources (AHRI) and the Society of Editors (Tas). Jane was State Manager of the Australian Marketing Institute in 2007.