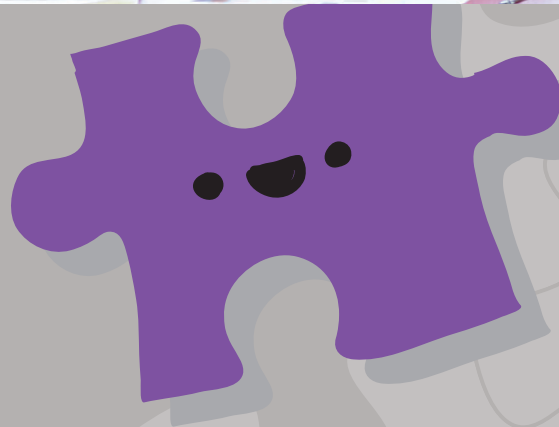


# VALUES BASED RECRUITMENT TOOLKIT

# VBRT

## MODULE 7

## USING A VALUES BASED APPROACH IN REFERENCE CHECKS



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## USING A VALUES BASED APPROACH IN REFERENCE CHECKS

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## INTRODUCTION

Reference checks are used by many employers in the disability services sector and are considered a vital part of any recruitment process. By contacting previous employers, schools, colleagues and other sources, employers are provided the opportunity to confirm an applicant's suitability for the role. Reference checks have long been classified as poor predictors of applicant performance when used alone.<sup>1</sup> When properly combined with information from other recruitment techniques, they can be a useful tool to guiding the selection decision.

The information provided in reference checks can range in detail from simply confirming that the person has the experience that they say they have, through to a detailed recommendation of their suitability for the role. In the context of values based recruitment (VBR), reference checks provide the opportunity to confirm the demonstration of values critical to the sector, organisation and role. NDS has, in consultation with the disability sector, developed and defined five values that demonstrate a commitment to person-centred practice. These are detailed in Module One of this Toolkit and are used throughout the Toolkit and this document to show how they can be used in a structured reference check process.

Reasons for using references can be summarised as follows:

- To check that the person is who they say they are
- To confirm their previous experience
- To assess suitability for the role
- To add information not disclosed in the interview
- To note any precautions of employing the applicant
- To satisfy everyone that reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the organisation has exercised duty of care towards the people they support

## PROCESS FOR REQUESTING REFERENCES

The process of reference checking can be nerve-racking for both applicants and the person giving the reference. Under the "Privacy Act 1988", applicants may claim access to information provided by their referees. Previous employers are therefore sometimes hesitant to provide information beyond simply confirming the applicant's employment.<sup>2</sup> The following tips can encourage participation:

- Gain consent from the applicant to contact their referees
- Provide referees with the rationale for the reference check
- Outline what information you would like
- Explain how information will be used and shared

Using a structured approach, plan specific questions to ask the referee. It may be useful to give them a description of the role that the applicant will be undertaking. Some general questions might ask about:

- In what capacity they know the person (e.g. personal/professional)
- How long they have known them
- Any follow-up questions arising from the recruitment process
- Comments on the applicant's suitability for particular tasks
- Comments on the applicant's suitability to work with a specific person

Referees should be thanked for their contribution and details for any follow up contact or questions provided.

## REFERENCE CHECK CONDUCT

Reference checks can be conducted in writing or verbally, either by email or phone. While written reference checks promote standardisation, telephone reference checks provide recruiters the opportunity to use follow-up questions and to probe the respondent's answers. As such, recruiters may tend to use an unstructured approach to conducting telephone reference checks. Unstructured approaches pose risk to asking questions that are not specifically related to the job requirements. A combined approach can also be used. A standardised line of questioning can be used over the phone. The recruiter takes notes and sends these to the referee to edit and confirm.

## WHO TO CONTACT

As VBR-informed reference checks are used primarily to provide information on an applicant's past workplace performance, it is recommended that references are given by the applicant's most recent employer and ideally their last two employers. Referees should be in a supervisory or managerial position as opposed to a colleague in order to provide insight from a similar perspective of those in hiring positions. Confirm that the referee has had sufficient exposure to the applicant's workplace performance, such as by asking how often they interacted with the applicant. Note that you are not obliged to speak to all referees nominated by the applicant; however, only referees that the applicant has provided approval to speak to should be contacted. Under the "Privacy Act 1988", applicants may claim access to their references.

Some people find it difficult to identify a referee, particularly if they have been out of work, education or volunteering for some time. If the applicant has not provided their current or a most recent supervisor or manager as a referee, or if permission to contact them is refused, they should be informed that the lack of this reference could affect whether they are selected. This conversation enables the applicant to justify their reasons and for you to discuss alternatives depending on their response. Some other people who the applicant

may offer as referees may include other professionals who may have knowledge of the applicant, such as social workers, probation officers, health visitors, tutors and religious leaders. As a last resort, personal acquaintances such as friends and families may be used. Be prepared to help people think about who they know who could give them a reference.

## STRUCTURED REFERENCE CHECKS

Basing reference checks on specific criteria through the form of structured reference checks promotes fairness for applicants and establishes relevance of the information obtained.<sup>3</sup> In addition to asking questions relating to the referee's relationship with the applicant and the circumstance of their employment, questions should be carefully planned to:

1. Confirm the aligned values the applicant demonstrated during the assessment process
2. Investigate circumstances where there may be value misalignment

Questions should ask for behavioural examples to validate the demonstration of values. Examples for each of the values that demonstrate a commitment to person-centred practice can be seen below.

VALUE	SAMPLE QUESTION
<b>Respectfulness</b>	In your view how did X typically communicate with others? How well were they able to pick up on and respond to other people's cues?
<b>Accountability</b>	How reliable was X in meeting set objectives? To what extent did X hold themselves accountable for following through?
<b>Collaboration</b>	How did X work with others? Can you describe a situation where X was required to work with others? How did X embrace the input of others?
<b>Resourcefulness</b>	Can you provide me an example where X was required to solve a complex problem? How did X go about this?
<b>Integrity</b>	Has there been a time when X's honesty or integrity has been called into question? What was the situation, and how did X respond?

## REFERENCES THAT CAUSE CONCERN

While the majority of reference checks confirm the strengths and suitability of an applicant, there are circumstances where referees' responses or lack of response may indicate caution for hiring. Such information should be reviewed in the context of your original impression of the applicant. This may call for review of the reference within the context of the original impression of the applicant and may require the use of additional references. Consider all the references and feedback collectively in the context of the role, their performance in selection and any additional support and training that is available to address concerns. Make a final decision on suitability for the role based on all of the information you have.

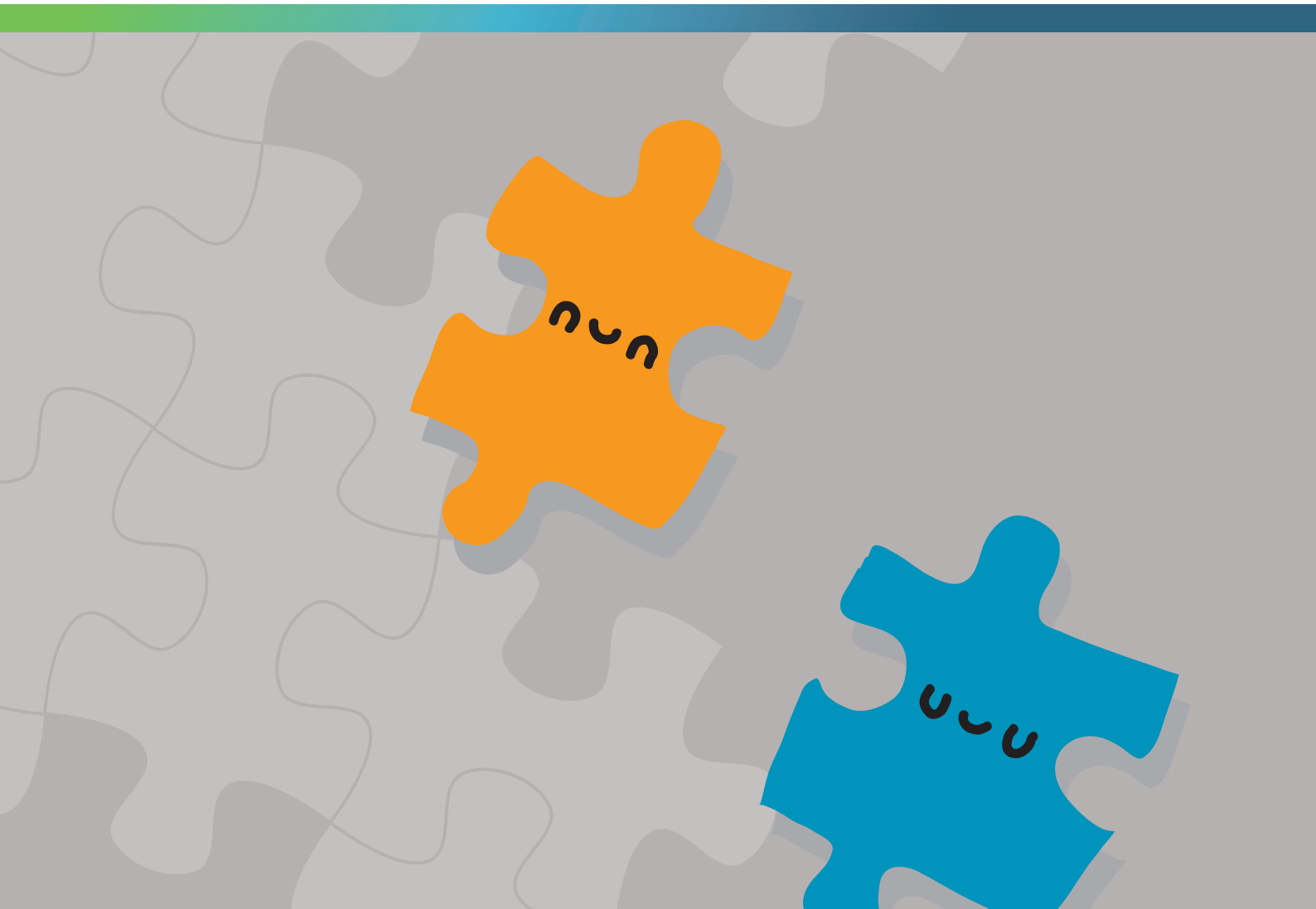
## SUMMARY

Reference checks should be used to confirm information from other assessment techniques and feedback should be combined with your other assessments of the applicant. They should be carried out in a structured manner, where questions are based on specific criteria linked to the role. Consent should be obtained before contacting referees. Ideally people from the applicant's most recent employers will be used; however, alternative sources may be appropriate in some circumstances. You can use and adapt the behavioural questions in this Toolkit in developing your structured reference questions for each applicant.

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### END NOTES

1. Muchinsky (1979). "The use of reference reports in personnel selection: A review and evaluation". *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 52, 287-297.
2. The Workplace Lawyers (2015). "Reference checks and privacy: What to say and how to say it". [www.theworkplacelawyers.com.au/blog/2015/8/5/reference-checks-and-privacy-what-to-say-and-how-to-say-it](http://www.theworkplacelawyers.com.au/blog/2015/8/5/reference-checks-and-privacy-what-to-say-and-how-to-say-it)
3. Taylor, P.J., Pajo, K., Cheung, G.W. & Stringfield, P. (2004). "Dimensionality and Validity of a Structured Telephone Reference Check Procedure". *Personnel Psychology*, 57, 745-772.



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**VBRT** ..... VBR TOOLKIT MODULES  
DISABILITY SECTOR