

office of the
commissioner for
public employment

northern territory public sector

merit selection guide



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THE MERIT SELECTION GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental tenet of human resource management, upon which service in the Northern Territory Public Sector is based, is the merit principle.

In its broadest sense, merit based selection is central to apolitical Public Sector accountability in that it ensures that employees providing services to the Territory Community have the appropriate knowledge, skills and levels of responsibility to do their jobs.

At any level within the workplace, the key to success is to have the person with the most appropriate knowledge and skills to do each job. If the selection is right it will have a positive impact across the whole unit, get it wrong and the overall performance of the unit, and agency, is at risk.

This publication is a set of principle-based guidelines designed to help managers and supervisors to get the selection right. It allows for flexible, practical approaches to merit based selection.

The selection of staff based on merit is crucial to maintaining a productive and harmonious workplace. I urge you to read the guidelines carefully and apply its contents thoughtfully.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Kirwan'.

JOHN KIRWAN
Commissioner for Public Employment

Merit selection

In the Northern Territory Public Sector (NTPS), selection is based on the merit principle.

What is Merit?

Merit is defined in the *Public Sector Employment and Management Act* as “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.”

How is Merit Assessed?

Merit is determined through a fair and transparent assessment process based on the stated principles of merit, natural justice, human resource management and conduct.

These guiding principles are found in the *Public Sector Employment and Management Act*, its Regulations and Employment Instructions.

The assessment process is chosen to suit the circumstances of the vacancy and the business environment in which it operates and, in most cases, is carried out by a panel.

The panel is responsible for conducting an assessment process which ensures the most meritorious outcome and which will withstand scrutiny.

The merit assessment process generally includes the following steps:

- Applicants, taking into account the responsibilities of the job, provide written evidence of their qualifications, skills, knowledge and experience which demonstrates their claims against the selection criteria contained in the job description.
- The panel considers applications and obtains as much other information about applicants as they require in order to make an informed assessment.
- When the panel has gathered sufficient information, they evaluate the evidence to determine who, in their judgement, has established the greatest capacity to do the job.

The selection advisory panel

Why have a panel?

The process of merit assessment in the NTPS is usually carried out by a panel, as distinct from one person. This method offers the advantages that come from the diverse insights, observations and experiences of panel members.

The role of the panel

The selection advisory panel (the panel) is responsible for assessing the merit of applicants and making a recommendation to the Chief Executive Officer or delegate. Each member of the panel is equally responsible for ensuring the confidentiality, impartiality, fairness and timeliness of the merit assessment process.

In order to make an assessment and a recommendation, the panel needs to obtain sufficient information about each applicant's merit.

Composition and skills of a panel

A panel is usually made up of a group of three or more people who:

- understand the requirements of the job
- have the skills necessary to make an assessment
- reflect the diversity of the NTPS workforce or general population
- have no conflict of interest, real or apparent, arising from the selection process

- are familiar with the NTPS merit selection process and any agency-specific selection policies
- understand the principles of equal employment opportunity and natural justice
- include an experienced chairperson.

It is usual for the majority of panel members to be NTPS employees and for at least one panel member to come from the relevant business area. It is good practice to have a mixed-gender panel. In some circumstances, it may be desirable to include a panel member from a particular cultural background relevant to the job requirements or to the applicants.

The panel may also include people who are not NTPS employees, but who have the knowledge, experience or expertise in the work area relevant to the job. Agencies may ask an industry representative to be a panel member.

Confidentiality

Panel members must maintain confidentiality throughout the assessment process. It is inappropriate to discuss the deliberations of the panel with anyone other than a panel member.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Shortlisting

What is shortlisting?

Shortlisting is a sorting process to identify those applicants who warrant further consideration. This process is a systematic assessment of the strengths of the applicants' claims against the selection criteria.

Consideration of redeployees

A redeployee is an employee who has been formally declared potentially surplus to the requirements of an agency by the Chief Executive Officer.

Redeployees should be given prior consideration for the vacancy at the shortlisting stage. Redeployees are assessed for their ability to do the job with a reasonable period of training.

Where more than one applicant is a redeployee, the merit principle applies between those applicants.

If the panel does not recommend the redeployee, a selection report must be approved by the Commissioner for Public Employment prior to any further action.

How are applicants shortlisted?

The methods used for shortlisting may depend on the number of applications received. Generally, shortlisting is based on the written information provided by the applicant but may include contacting referees or conducting other forms of assessment.

Reasons for not shortlisting include:

- the applicant does not meet one or more of the essential selection criteria
- the applicant meets the selection criteria but not to the extent that other applicants have.

The decisions regarding shortlisting are documented by the panel in the selection report.

Interviews

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.

The panel usually interviews shortlisted applicants and may choose to use other forms of assessment. Reasons for interviewing or not interviewing are documented in the selection report.

Stages of the interview process

A well-constructed interview process includes the stages of planning, interviewing and post-interview discussion.

Planning allows the panel to make necessary preparation to obtain the most useful and relevant information through the interview process. The planning stage includes scheduling and providing advance notice to applicants of times, venues and any special interview requirements. During this stage, questions and other relevant materials are prepared and the panel considers cultural sensitivities and any special needs identified by applicants.

Interviewing enables the panel to establish a rapport with the applicant, follow a line of questioning related to the job requirements and selection criteria, fully explore answers and allow for questions from the applicant.

Post-interview discussion provides an opportunity for the panel to exchange views on the information provided by the applicant and to consider what information they need to clarify or obtain and why.

Other assessment methods

In collecting information to explore the capacity of applicants to do the job, it may be appropriate for the panel to consider other assessment methods.

When considering other methods of assessment, the panel needs to understand what the assessment is intended to measure, the value of using the assessment and its:

- reliability and validity
- cost and time effectiveness
- cultural appropriateness
- fairness (including meeting any special needs of applicants with an impairment)
- relevance to the selection criteria.

There is also a requirement for some tests to be conducted by appropriately qualified and experienced people.

Some Assessment Methods

Case studies – the applicants are given a certain amount of time to prepare a verbal or written response to a particular hypothetical situation relevant to the job.

Role plays – the applicants are invited to participate in a role play exercise relevant to the job.

Samples of work and presentations – where relevant to the job requirements, the panel may ask applicants to provide examples of past work or make a presentation to the panel.

Aptitude tests – are designed to measure ability or capacity to learn by identifying a person’s area of talent or suitability for certain types of work. Examples include tests for numerical ability, speed and accuracy, clerical ability and mechanical aptitude.

Achievement tests – aim to measure what has already been learned. The test can consist of a written or oral examination or a simulated “on-the-job” exercise. Achievement tests are suitable where specific skills are used in the job and it is relatively easy to measure them.

Personality and temperament tests – tend to be used at more senior levels and aim to identify personality traits such as emotional adjustment, assertiveness, etc. Such tests are costly and need to be administered by trained psychologists.

Panels considering the use of personality and temperament tests must first seek advice from their Human Resource Unit.

Contacting referees

The purpose of contacting referees is to obtain further information about an applicant's work performance, and to explore and verify information regarding an applicant's claims. It is good practice for all panel members to be present when contacting referees and for contact to be made by talking to the referees. Personal contact with referees allows the panel to explore and clarify information and to verify the comments made.

It is usual for a panel to contact one or more referees for each shortlisted applicant. The reasons for contacting or not contacting referees are documented in the selection report.

The panel may contact referees nominated by the applicant and other persons who the panel considers can provide relevant comment (non-nominated referees). The panel should advise referees that their comments will be provided to the applicant. Referee comments are documented and form part of the selection report.

Unfavourable comment

When considering unfavourable comment provided by a referee, the panel needs to determine the merit of the comment. In each case, the panel will make a judgement about whether to seek an alternative source of information.

Based on the principles of natural justice, applicants must be given the opportunity to respond to unfavourable comments made by a non-nominated referee. The applicant's response must be taken into consideration when determining the merit of the referee's comments.

Evaluating applicants and making a recommendation

Having gathered sufficient evidence through the assessment process, the panel makes a systematic and objective evaluation of all relevant information. The evidence before the panel can include written applications, information obtained through interviews and/or other assessment methods, referee reports and applicant response to unfavourable comment.

Where an applicant is a redeployee, the evidence must be evaluated in the context of their ability to meet the essential selection criteria with a reasonable period of training.

When the evaluation is completed, the panel makes a recommendation to the Chief Executive Officer or delegate. The reasons for the recommendation are documented in the selection report.

Arriving at a recommendation generally involves:

- individual evaluation of applicants by each panel member against the selection criteria
- open and frank discussion and exchange of views between the panel members about their individual evaluations
- reaching agreement on the merit and ranking of applicants with the strongest claims for the job
- making a recommendation. If agreement cannot be reached, a minority report is included in the selection report

Writing the selection report

The selection report (the report) is the official record of the process used by the panel to reach its recommendation. In the report, the panel demonstrates the process that they have followed, linking the vacancy details, the systematic assessment of all applicants, evaluation of the shortlisted applicants, the recommendation and reasons for the recommendation. The report must be able to stand up to scrutiny as the record of a fair and impartial process of assessment and evaluation.

The report provides the Chief Executive Officer or delegate with the necessary information to make an informed and fair recruitment decision. The final decision to select an applicant or to take other action rests with the Chief Executive Officer or delegate.

The report

The report generally includes:

- details of the vacancy, panel members, applications received, including names of redeployees where applicable
- methods of assessment (interview, referee reports, other forms of assessment used)
- individual applicant reports

- objective comparison and ranking of applicants with the strongest claims for the job
- recommendation for selection or other action, signed by panel members
- a minority report, where applicable, signed by the dissenting panel member

Individual applicant reports

The individual applicant report is a record of the assessment of each shortlisted applicant's merit for the job. Comments about the applicant must be objective, fair and based on the evidence before the panel. A copy of this report is available to the applicant following the finalisation of the selection process.

The individual applicant report describes the panel's assessment of the applicant against the selection criteria and states the reasons for the panel's conclusions, consistent with the information obtained. This includes referee reports and comments by the applicant in response to any unfavourable comment provided by non-nominated referees. It is signed by each member of the panel.

For a redeployee, the individual applicant report must demonstrate the panel's assessment of the applicant's ability to meet the essential criteria with a reasonable period of training.

Providing feedback to applicants

Post-selection feedback is an integral part of an effective selection process and, in accordance with the principles of natural justice, should be offered to applicants. Feedback can provide applicants with information about their individual performance in the assessment process and can be a positive tool for their career development.

The information provided is based on the applicant's:

- assessment against the selection criteria
- strengths and areas for improvement
- gaps identified in comparison with the selected applicant.

Feedback can be provided by one or more panel members. In the interests of consistency, panel members who do not participate in the feedback session should refrain from making any comment to applicants.

Feedback must be factual, constructive and fair and provided to applicants in a sensitive manner.

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