

101 Ways to Erode Trust in Public Sector Recruiting

Dr Ann Villiers, *Mental Nutritionist*®



Mental Nutrition®
Thinking flexibly. Speaking confidently.

101 Ways to erode trust in public sector recruiting

by Dr Ann Villiers

Mental Nutritionist®

www.mentalnutrition.com

Liability disclaimer

The material contained in this e-book is general and is not intended as advice on any particular matter. *Mental Nutrition®* and the author expressly disclaims all and any liability to any persons whatsoever in respect of anything done by any such person in reliance, whether in whole or in part, on this e-book. Please take appropriate legal advice before acting on any information in this e-book.

Introduction

Finding skilled, capable staff is becoming more competitive with skill shortages and changing population demographics.

Public sector agencies are competing with each other to fill jobs. Their approach to recruiting and selecting staff can be a key factor in how successful they are in finding the right people.

Sadly selection panel members can be unskilled and ill-informed, thereby adding to the pain both for applicants and agencies.

In this e-book, I'm going to share with you 101 ways you can erode trust in your recruiting and selecting practices. The information is based on 20 years experience on both sides of the interview table and working with applicants and panels.

Give this e-book to management so they can champion more professional approaches. Give it to anyone on a selection panel so they can avoid these traps.

Copyright: *Mental Nutrition*® 2006

1

Not appreciating that retention is an element of recruiting and selecting staff.

Action:

People involved in recruiting and selecting staff need to understand that the way this process is conducted will impact on whether or not staff hang around.

If people have a bad experience at any stage during the process it will leave a sour taste in their mouth. They may bad mouth your agency to others, decide not to accept your offer, join but not stay long.

2

Not understanding the cost
of poor recruiting practices

Action:

Finding and keeping a new member of staff for several years can cost anything from \$250,000 upwards.

This is a significant asset.

'Purchasing' an unsuitable asset, one that needs more training than expected, is less productive than expected, doesn't stay or does stay, is a costly choice.

Chances of making a poor purchasing choice are reduced by paying more attention to the details of the process.

3

Not understanding that recruiting staff is a PR exercise.

Action:

There are multiple moments during recruiting staff when people have contact with your agency. These moments include:

Browsing your web site.

Talking to recruitment staff.

Talking to the Contact Officer.

Reading Applicant Information Kits.

Being interviewed.

Each of these moments will either reflect well or poorly on your agency. Word gets around. Make sure you handle these moments well.

4

Assuming the current selection documents will be suitable for the future.

Action:

An easy option is to take the selection documents that already exist and reuse them.

This could be a poor choice because the job may have changed, the future may be different from the past, and the needs of the work area may mean different skills and experience are called for.

Make sure you review the existing documents.

5

Basing selection documents on how the current occupant does the job.

Action:

This is an easy option however it could prove disastrous for your work area.

How the current occupant of a job performs should not be your measure for the future. If they are an outstanding performer then they may provide a standard. However it is wise to review the documents to make sure they meet present and future needs.

6

Not considering the skill mix of the current team.

Action:

If your work unit is a real team with interdependent people working in cooperation with each other, then you need to consider whether the new person is to be a clone of who you already have, or whether they need to bring new skills and experience.

Consider the skill mix of your team in the light of future needs and use this analysis to inform your recruitment process.

7

Not considering the future needs of the work area or agency.

Action:

Part of the defining stage of recruiting and selecting staff is to consider what the future needs may be and how these may affect the new recruit.

Are there changes on the horizon? Local ones like moving accommodation, taking on a new project, management changes. Broader ones like policy changes, restructures, new programs.

What impact will these changes have on a new recruit? Take this into account in defining selection documents.

8

Trying to capture every requirement in the selection criteria.

Action:

One sure way to turn people off applying is to create a lengthy list of complicated selection criteria. If you make applying for a job too hard people just won't bother.

Focus on the critical skills, experience and qualities essential for carrying out the job and delivering important outcomes.

Keep in mind you probably won't find a person who can do everything you would like. There's no challenge if someone can already do the job.

9

Mixing inappropriate elements in selection criteria.

Action:

In your enthusiasm to capture everything in the selection criteria you may end up with criteria that look something like the proverbial dog's dinner. Unrelated skills lumped together. Here's an example:

'Highly developed interpersonal and communication skills, including liaison and representation skills, and project management experience.'

Project management doesn't belong here.

10

Writing vague and ambiguous selection criteria.

Action:

Make sure you test your selection criteria to see that they make sense and aren't ambiguous. Take this example:

'Good oral and written communication skills, including demonstrated interpersonal and negotiation skills and the ability to prepare reports and briefs.'

The word 'including' introduces questions as to whether 'interpersonal and negotiation skills' and 'reports and briefs' relate jointly or separately to oral and written communication skills.

11

Not giving sufficient information about how to tackle generic criteria.

Action:

With the increasing use of generic criteria or capabilities applicants can be at a loss as to how to go about writing to them. They can appear to have no relation to the job duties. They can be complicated, with many parts. It can be unclear as to whether an applicant should cover all the parts.

Even if advised that addressing all the parts is not essential, an applicant can be left wondering how they will be assessed against the applicant who does.

A major shift in the process needs to be well explained.

12

Assuming it is sufficient to say 'Applicants must write to the selection criteria.'

Action:

To an 'outsider' this is a meaningless statement. They will likely not even register that it is of significance.

Using this statement to justify not considering anyone who 'fails' to write to the selection criteria is one way to reduce credibility and trust in public sector processes.

If you want people from outside the public sector to have real access to jobs, then something more than this statement is needed.

13

Asking for such specific knowledge that only internal applicants would know.

Action:

Take this approach if you wish to reduce faith in your process and the number of people applying.

What you want is a person who knows how to find out answers, asks questions and has strong research skills.

Knowing specific knowledge, unless it's absolutely essential to delivering outcomes in the job and you don't want to spend time training the person, can usually be readily acquired.

14

Not understanding what your selection criteria qualifiers mean.

Action:

Selection criteria can include words like 'good', 'superior' and 'excellent'. These words qualify the skill, suggesting the level of quality required. For example:

'Good telephone skills.'

'Excellent communication skills.'

Do you know what you mean by 'good' and 'excellent'? And more importantly, would you recognise it when you see it? How will you recognise 'excellent' communication skills as compared to 'good' or 'mediocre' skills?

15

Not being clear about what different skills mean.

Action:

Selection criteria can cover a range of related or similar skills, yet insufficient thought has been given to how these differ. For example, people can confuse management and leadership; organisational and administrative skills.

Are you clear on how these differ? Do you really need to include each one?

Being unclear about skills can lead to confused applicants and poor selection decisions.

16

Not deciding the selection process before advertising.

Action:

A quality recruitment process includes deciding the full selection process before any action is taken. As a result, applicants can be fully informed about the process and the selection team knows that they have established a coherent process that maximises their chance of selecting quality staff.

Deciding the selection process on the run increases the chances of making uninformed choices.

17

Not considering the full range of selection options.

Action:

It's easy to go with the 'application, interview, referee report' option. It looks so straightforward and useful.

The reality is that not all selection criteria can be assessed via these methods.

To select quality staff you need to consider all selection options, select a range to give multiple sources of evidence, and make sure that any option will give evidence against specific criteria.

For example, an interview question is of marginal use in determining a person's skill with software.

18

Not letting applicants know what the selection process is.

Action:

How does it benefit your process to spring surprises on applicants? This only adds to their stress levels and decreases their chances of putting a strong case.

If applicants have to complete a work test before they are interviewed, tell them.

Even better, include in your information to applicants all the stages in the process.

This does assume you have thought this through before you start advertising.

19

Taking a minimalist approach to providing information to applicants.

Action:

Your Information Kit to applicants is a vital PR tool that will either help or hinder you to attract a quality field.

Work on the basis that more information is better. If you find yourself thinking 'I don't need to tell applicants this,' stop and ask yourself, 'Will it matter if I do tell applicants? Will it help applicants to make a decision? Will it encourage a quality field?'

20

Not giving creative thought to how to attract a quality field of applicants.

Action:

In a competitive environment you need to give careful thought to how you will attract quality applicants. It is better to attract a small quality field than a large, unsuitable field.

Consider the full range of options of how to appeal to the sort of people who would be interested in your job. Where are they likely to be? How could you obtain their attention?

A small notice in a professional newsletter may be far more useful than a large newspaper advertisement.

21

Forgetting to consider the needs of staff on leave.

Action:

One of your best candidates may be someone who is on maternity leave, long service leave, sabbatical.

Make sure you let these staff know about job opportunities.

22

Assuming that a person who has been acting in a job will win it.

Action:

While a person who has been acting in a job may have a head start, it is unwise to assume they are a 'shoe in'.

For starters this reduces the credibility of the process. It is also grossly unfair to other applicants to waste their time on a predetermined process.

If you are genuine about running a fair process then everybody needs to be given a chance to fully put their case.

23

Not having a clear method for assessing criteria about Values, Code of Conduct and government policies.

Action:

If you are serious about these matters (public sector professionalism, OH & S, diversity, participative management etc.) then work out how you are going to assess a candidate.

Paying lip service to this criterion undermines credibility. If it's on the list, do something with it.

24

Not thinking about what is attractive about your agency.

Action:

The reasons why people will choose to work in your agency will be quite specific and differ from those for another agency.

Attracting a quality field includes knowing what is attractive about your agency so this information can be included in material provided to applicants.

Factors include: purpose; location, size; parking; proximity to facilities and transport; staff benefits; pay; management culture; professional development opportunities.

25

Relying on HR staff to get you through the process.

Action:

HR staff will be a valuable source of advice and may be part of your selection team.

However, it is your responsibility to take charge of your own recruitment and selection process and to make sure you are knowledgeable and skilled.

You are making a major purchase and you can't afford to ignore your responsibility.

26

Using an untrained selection panel.

Action:

Recruiting and selecting staff is a management role that demands highly skilled people. In addition to knowing your responsibilities you need people who have skills in job analysis, questioning, rapport building and listening.

Including untrained people on a selection panel reduces credibility and increases the chances of making poor decisions.

27

Thinking of recruiting and selecting staff as an 'add on' job.

Action:

Certainly you don't recruit staff often. But then, neither do you do many other aspects of your work.

Just because you may only be part of a recruitment process a few times a year, this is no reason not to regard it as a serious, significant management function that warrants being regarded as integral to your work.

28

Assuming the application is an indicator of a person's writing skills.

Action:

An application demands a special style of writing. Unless you are in a marketing role, the style is unlike the writing tasks most public servants carry out in their day-to-day work.

An application gives an indication of a writing style and of writing mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling), but not the writing skills required on the job.

If the job needs someone who can produce particular types of writing, include selection options that provide evidence of this, such as a work test or a portfolio.

29

Assuming an applicant with higher degrees is overqualified and won't stay long.

Action:

When short listing all sorts of assumptions may be made that eliminate potential talent.

One of these assumptions is particularly relevant to applicants born overseas who have MBAs, PhDs or multiple degrees and who want to enter the public service.

These people realise they are not going to obtain a job commensurate with their qualifications. What they want to do is obtain a job and prove themselves.

Such a person could be the very one you need.

30

Assuming a person who
has changed jobs
frequently won't stay long.

Action:

Another assumption concerns a person's work history. No longer do people take a job for life. Work portfolios include temporary contract work and work periods of perhaps only 18 months to three years.

Before making this assumption be clear about how long, on average, people stay in your agency. Check what your expectations are about length of service. Are they realistic?

Consider that while you are recruiting for your agency you are also recruiting for the whole of the public service.

31

Assuming that a person with a mixed career is strange.

Action:

You may block a talented person joining your staff because you take a narrow view about what a career should look like. No longer do people have 'tidy' time lines and obvious career paths.

People change professions, try out new experiences, wander around. Just because a person's work history doesn't make sense to you does not mean they are unsuitable applicants.

Keep an open mind when reviewing a person's resume.

32

Assuming that a person who hasn't written to the selection criteria should be automatically eliminated from further consideration.

Action:

Your most promising applicant could be the person who hasn't written to the selection criteria.

While it is desirable that applicants stick to the process, not everyone understands the process, even if you think you've told them what it is.

If an applicant looks promising based on what they have provided stop before you toss them in the 'No' bucket. Consider making sure they are not your best applicant.

33

Choosing a Contact Officer who does not appreciate the PR value of this role.

Action:

Who you pick as the Contact Officer is a critical decision. If as the manager of the recruitment and selection process you decide to delegate this role, then choose wisely.

The person in this role can be the first point of contact with your agency for an applicant. If the job is carried out poorly it can reflect badly and word gets around. Your agency's reputation is at stake. A poor choice for this role will make it harder to recruit in the future.

34

Choosing a Contact Officer who believes they should reveal as little as possible.

Action:

What is the secret here? The Contact Officer's role is to help applicants understand what the agency does, what the job vacancy is about, what the work area does. This information helps people decide whether or not to apply. It is better for an applicant to reach a decision not to apply than for them to put in the effort only to be disappointed.

It is also better for an applicant to proceed with an application based on quality information so they can offer you the most useful information about themselves.

35

Choosing a Contact Officer who is unwilling to talk and meet with potential applicants.

Action:

Yes we are all busy. But remember that you are purchasing a pricey 'asset'. If you were buying a new software package, a fleet of vehicles, safety equipment, would you buy out of the catalogue without having a look or meeting the salesperson? Probably not. Yet too often Contact Officers won't make time to talk to applicants, much less meet them and show them around.

This is part of the PR side of the role. It is also part of what may make your agency attractive – a welcoming, accessible environment. If you're serious about recruiting, make time for applicants.

36

Not telling the Contact Officer that they have been given this role.

Action:

Odd though it may seem, there are times when the Contact Officer only discovers that they have this role when an applicant rings them up.

This is not a reputation-enhancing option.

Make sure you establish this role well in advance and fully brief the person on what their responsibilities are.

37

Letting the Contact Officer go on leave when a job is advertised.

Action:

Nothing builds a good image like having an unfindable Contact Officer. Many an applicant has found that the Contact Officer has disappeared once a job is advertised.

By choosing your Contact Officer early, briefing them, and obtaining their commitment, you can avoid this embarrassing result.

38

Choosing a Contact Officer
who does not know much
about the job.

Action:

This choice is another blunder with implications for poor PR.

How are you going to sell your agency and the job if the person talking to applicants does not know what's involved?

Again, your choice and your briefing will be critical here.

39

Choosing a Contact Officer who has no interest in the job.

Action:

Probably worse than the person who does not know much about the job. At least they may have some interest even if little detail.

The person who has no interest will likely be offhand, thin on detail, and dismissive of applicants. Again, another PR disaster looming.

You may think that the person leaving the job is a good candidate for Contact Officer. Even if they are leaving on a positive note, their interest is likely going to be in the future, not in the present.

40

Choosing a Contact Officer
with a vested interest in
the job.

Action:

One of the worst choices you can make is to give the Contact Officer role to a person who is likely to be applying for the job. This can be someone working in the area or worse, the person who has been acting in the job.

Do not make their life difficult and do not undermine your recruitment process by making this choice. Pick someone who has no vested interest in the job.

41

Not telling applicants whether someone is acting in the job.

Action:

People know that the flavour of a job vacancy changes if someone has been acting in the job. There is no good reason why this information should be kept secret from applicants. Letting them know that someone has been acting in the job for a period of time is not breaching any national secret.

The applicant can decide whether to apply or not in the light of this information. Some applicants just won't bother because they work on the basis that 'the system is rigged'. Others will make a judgement to give the acting person 'a run for their money'.

42

Being inflexible about the closing date for applications.

Action:

Certainly you want to encourage people to submit their applications by the closing date.

But give some thought to those who genuinely need more time to accommodate the demands of writing an application. For example, people with a disability, such as impaired vision, may need extra time to prepare an application. Being flexible about the format of the application would also help.

43

Failing to see an interview as an opportunity to exchange information in order to make a decision.

Action:

People on selection panels can hold very narrow views about what an interview is all about.

An interview is a type of business meeting at which people exchange information in order to make a decision.

The applicant is deciding whether they want to work for you doing the work you want done. You are deciding who is the applicant who best meets the job requirements.

To make these informed decisions you need a two-way flow of information.

44

Assuming an interview is a memory test.

Action:

People on selection panels can make a number of assumptions about what an interview is all about.

If you assume that an interview is a memory test then you will expect applicants to recall all details about their work and about themselves entirely unaided. You may even 'mark down' an applicant who refers to any material they brought with them.

We don't expect this behaviour at other types of meetings so why expect it at an interview?

45

Believing an interview is a game of poker.

Action:

Another belief people can hold is that very little should be given away to an applicant. Selection panel members must play their cards close to the chest. They must neither engage with applicants as human beings, nor give any indication as to whether they have interpreted a question accurately and answered it comprehensively. It is a guessing game.

How does this help you select the best person for the job? Does it create a positive impression for the applicant?

An interview is a form of business meeting. Behave professionally.

46

Believing an interview is an interrogation.

Action:

Just because interviews involve questions doesn't mean it becomes a court room drama. Nor is it an opportunity to play 'good cop bad cop'.

Skilled interviewers take care in crafting questions, express them in a manner appropriate to a business meeting, and use a voice that indicates genuine interest.

47

Thinking the interview means having a set of questions which all applicants must be asked.

Action:

A structured interview process does mean that each applicant is asked the same set of questions.

However, where panels go astray is thinking that this is all they can ask.

In order to fully assess an applicant follow-up probing questions may be needed. Depending on the response given, these probing questions will differ between applicants.

48

Using an interview to test skills that would be better tested by other methods.

Action:

Not all skills lend themselves to being assessed by an interview. For example, ability to use software or equipment is better assessed with a work test.

If an interview is the primary method used to assess an applicant against all criteria it could well indicate that the panel has not given sufficient thought to the full range of options available to them.

49

Using the interview to assess communication skills.

Action:

An interview requires oral communication skills which are in part, unique to this situation. Few jobs require the ability to 'sell' one's abilities.

Assessing an applicant's oral communication skills solely on what they say at interview is flawed. A nervous applicant may become inarticulate during an interview but be a skilled orator on the job.

50

Having the panel meet immediately prior to the first interview to decide how to run the interview.

Action:

A panel that takes their job seriously would have met several times throughout the recruitment process.

In doing so they would have developed a sound understanding of the job, jointly determined the selection methods to be used, and prepared for the interview well before the day of the interviews.

51

Not thinking through how each question provides evidence to assess the applicant's capabilities.

Action:

There needs to be a clear link between the question asked and the information obtained. The information must provide evidence that enables the panel to assess the applicant's capabilities.

If the link is not clear the applicant will be confused and likely give an unhelpful response.

The panel will have difficulty assessing the applicant if the evidence does not support selection decision-making.

52

Cramming too many interviews into one day.

Action:

Interviewing skilfully is a mentally demanding task.

While the idea of 'getting it over with' is appealing, cramming too many into one day adds to the stress of the panel and increases the risk of poor decision-making.

Fairness demands that the panel is equally alert for each applicant.

53

Not allowing sufficient time for an interview.

Action:

How much time you allow for each interview will depend to some extent on the level of seniority of the job and how many of the criteria are being assessed at the interview.

Hoping that all applicants will be able to whip through their responses in a short amount of time is unrealistic. You are assuming your questions are clear to all applicants and that each applicant will be equally succinct. Both of these are flawed assumptions.

54

Assuming it is better to interview a mediocre applicant than no one at all.

Action:

This is a strong temptation when competition for staff is strong.

It is a poor choice to make. Are you really going to appoint a mediocre applicant, someone who may stay with you for ten years?

Remember how much your choices cost you.

55

Interviewing an internal applicant to give them interview experience even though their application is substandard.

Action:

Managers may be tempted to give an internal applicant a 'leg up' in the process by giving them interview experience, even though they have 'buckleys' of success.

This is a judgement call. Are you giving the person false expectations? Are you going to tell them their application is substandard? What if they perform brilliantly at interview. Are you going to give them the job even though you were generous in getting them to interview in the first place? And how will you justify your action to other staff?

56

Not agreeing with the scribe what their role is.

Action:

Using a scribe to record and report is an efficient way to conduct the process.

However, you need to be clear about what their role is and where the boundaries are.

Do they contribute to the interview process? Do you want advice from them? Are they invisible, silent partners?

57

Not making the scribe's role clear to applicants.

Action:

A skilled interview panel both introduces the scribe and explains their role.

The applicant then knows who this person is, whether or not they are part of the panel, and how much notice to take of them.

People like to be polite. Take care where you sit the scribe. Behind the applicant makes for an awkward situation both for the scribe and applicant.

58

Using a fishbowl office for interviews.

Action:

There are numerous logistical details to arrange for an effective interview.

Choosing a glass-walled office where passers by can look in on proceedings is a poor choice.

Privacy is essential for an interview. Pick an office that is not on a main traffic route for staff, is fully enclosed with solid, sound-proof walls.

59

Making finding the interview location the first challenge for applicants.

Action:

Do not assume that your office is easy to find.

Give applicants clear, specific directions on how to locate where the interview is to take place, where to park, what security arrangements apply, where to wait.

Applicants don't like to be late. Making this likely by giving poor information says more about you than the late applicant.

60

Lining the panel up on one side of a table.

Action:

This will appeal to those who think an interview is an interrogation.

Applicants are intimidated enough by having to face several people at interview. Lining them up so that the interview becomes the applicant versus the panel is not professional nor conducive to a productive meeting.

Use a round table or sit around a coffee table.

61

Using a large board table.

Action:

Many meetings do take place in rooms with dominating board tables. This is not the best choice for an interview.

An interview is a more intimate meeting. There are fewer people and the subject matter is personal.

Choose furniture that is appropriate to this context.

62

Placing the applicant facing a large, unprotected window.

Action:

An interview is painful enough without making applicants endure physical discomfort.

A window behind the panel means that it is difficult to see their faces and the glare from sunlight can generate headaches and sore eyes.

Being able to see a person's face is essential for hearing what is said and judging how information is being received.

63

Not providing for the comfort needs of applicants.

Action:

A courteous panel will give some thought to how to cater for the needs of applicants.

These needs include:

A comfortable place to wait.

Access to toilets.

Provision of clean glasses of water.

A comfortable chair.

Stand-by box of tissues.

64

Not making allowances for applicants' nervousness.

Action:

Most applicants will be nervous to one degree or another. Nothing is to be gained from ignoring this or making them even more upset.

Nervousness can affect people's ability to think, to hear, to speak clearly, slowly, coherently. Nervous mannerisms can manifest themselves.

Allow that applicants may misunderstand questions because of nervousness. Help them understand.

65

Behaving as though you are bored, impatient or uninterested.

Action:

Panel members who believe an interview is a game of poker adopt behaviours that give nothing away. The applicant receives no indication as to whether they are answering the right question, have given sufficient information, or are even being heard.

Such behaviour is disconcerting for the applicant. It also says more about you than about the applicant. It will likely make for poor decisions as you will have little information about people's interpersonal skills since you behave like a person who can't be engaged with.

Falling asleep is unforgivable.

66

Wanting to hear buzz words and assuming ignorance if they are not mentioned.

Action:

Most jobs and organisations have their in-house jargon. Sadly, some panel members think that peppering a response with the right buzz words means that the applicant 'knows'.

They might know the words. Whether they know what they mean is another matter.

A skilled panel will hear the meaning in what an applicant says and judge if they understand in-house jargon even if it is not actually mentioned.

67

Not introducing the applicant to the panel.

Action:

Common courtesies set the tone for an interview and signal your professionalism.

Each person in the room should be introduced by full name and details of where they are from and what their role is. This includes the scribe.

Name plates would also help applicants identify who's who and relieve them of the burden of remembering names.

68

Not shaking hands.

Action:

This is another common courtesy used at the start of business meetings.

Applicants may be uncertain about how the interview will start off. It is the chairperson's responsibility to set the tone through introductions and making clear that people will shake hands.

Consider what you will do if you know the applicant. Take the lead on this and make clear that you will shake hands with every applicant whether you know them or not. Don't leave the applicant uncertain about these details.

69

Assuming the applicant that brings notes with them doesn't know their job.

Action:

While it may seem reasonable to expect applicants, particularly internal ones, to know their job and to speak about it unaided, this does not take account of the impact of nervousness.

Equally, an applicant who brings notes is well prepared. When we attend business meetings we usually take notes with us. Why is an interview different?

70

Asking multi-part questions.

Action:

A skilled panel knows that applicants have trouble remembering complicated questions. This includes multi-part questions and detailed case studies.

Make the process more useful by giving applicants a copy of the questions or at least allowing them to make notes while you go through the question.

71

Asking inappropriate questions at interview.

Action:

Inappropriate questions include those that breach privacy and discrimination laws.

A skilled panel will know what their legal responsibilities are and will carefully assess all questions in the light of this knowledge.

72

Asking useless questions.

Action:

A sure give away that a panel is unskilled and unprepared is asking useless questions.

A useless question is one that serves no purpose, does not provide evidence that can be used to help reach a decision about the capability of an applicant.

An example is 'Tell us something about yourself.' This invites the applicant to choose a random sample of information with no direction as to its contribution to the interview.

All questions, including ice breakers, need to have a purpose and to have been tested.

73

Not listening actively to applicants' responses.

Action:

Interviews require skillful, active listening. This is demanding and tiring. Yet every applicant deserves this courtesy.

Active listening may include: taking notes (although your scribe does this in detail); maintaining eye contact; looking interested and giving encouragement (such as head nods).

It does not include looking at your watch, or remaining poker faced, looking bored, or avoiding eye contact. Or worse, falling asleep.

74

Not accommodating
diversity.

Action:

A panel reveals their lack of skill when they expect all applicants to respond in similar ways without taking account of cultural differences.

This is particularly the case with behaviours like hand shakes, eye contact, voice projection, self-promotion.

75

Using interviews to eliminate rather than select.

Action:

Panels can show their biases by allowing any negative information to become the basis for downgrading an applicant and eliminating them from further consideration.

Each applicant should be assessed against the criteria and multiple sources of information considered.

76

Not testing interview questions.

Action:

Many of the problems that occur during interviews would be eliminated if panels tested their questions before inflicting them on applicants.

Even if this is only to think through possible answers this at least gives some idea as to whether they will give useful evidence.

Ideally the questions should be tested on people who are not on the panel and not applicants.

77

Not testing work tests.

Action:

Some criteria lend themselves to work tests. Examples are writing skills, analytical skills, use of software and equipment.

Panels need to design the work test and then test it out on several people to establish if they understand the instructions, actually do what the test is designed to do, and produce evidence that corresponds to the criterion in question.

Testing may also reveal that the effort involved is not worth what it delivers or that there are in-build biases that disadvantage some applicants.

78

Allowing first impressions
to determine decisions.

Action:

Panel members need to keep an open mind about applicants and wait until all evidence has been assessed.

While people tend to make judgements about others quickly, panel members need to be particularly vigilant about not allowing these impressions to predetermine their decisions.

79

Using an inappropriate rating scale.

Action:

Commonly used rating scales may include inappropriate distinctions.

For example a scale that uses the distinction Competent and Fully Competent is flawed. You can't be a little bit competent. Either you are Partially Competent and Fully Competent, or you are Competent and Not Competent.

Check you are using a scale with appropriate distinctions that are fully understood by all members of the panel.

80

Not designing specific questions for referees.

Action:

Referees may have provided a written response on a designated form. This is a starting point rather than the end of the matter.

Based on other evidence, decide what information you want to obtain from referees in addition to general comments. Design specific questions that probe and provide useful evidence.

81

Assuming you can only talk to nominated referees.

Action:

While it is desirable to talk to an applicant's nominated referees there are times when talking to other people may be useful.

If the immediate supervisor hasn't been nominated you may wish to explore further.

If supervision/management ability is important you may wish to talk with subordinates.

If customer service is important you may wish to talk with customers.

A skilled panel would ask for these nominations from the outset.

82

As a panel member, not writing referee reports before seeing any applications.

Action:

If you are a member of the selection panel and also a referee for an applicant you must write the referee report before you see any applications. Preferably before applications close, so there can be no hint of any bias or preferential treatment.

If you know applicants you should declare this to the rest of the panel to deal with any perceptions of conflict of interest.

83

Contacting private sector referees without considering the consequences.

Action:

Applicants from the private sector may express concern about contacting their referees. Their concern is that if their boss is alerted to their interest in another job this will adversely affect their current employment.

You should contact the applicant first and let them know where they are at in the selection process and that you wish to contact their referees. Obtain their permission to proceed.

84

Not seeking applicant's comments when you receive adverse referee comments.

Action:

Natural justice principles mean that when you receive adverse or contradictory comments from a referee you should allow the applicant to respond.

There may be valid reasons why such differences occur (e.g. the referee hasn't been fully briefed or two people have different ways of looking at the same situation.)

You then need to be careful about who you believe. Just because someone is more senior doesn't automatically make them right or more credible.

85

Accepting a referee's rating
at face value.

Action:

Referees may be asked to provide a rating of the applicant against each of the criteria.

A panel should decide if they are going to accept this rating at face value or determine their own rating, consistent with their rating process for all other forms of evidence.

Accepting a referee's rating may not be wise. The basis for their rating may differ from the panel's. They may also be thinking of the applicant in terms of the job they are in rather than the job they are applying for.

86

Not weighing up all the evidence.

Action:

One danger with selection processes is that one source of evidence is allowed to outweigh all other sources. This can happen with the interview. And within the interview, letting first impressions take precedence.

A skilled panel will weigh up all the evidence from all sources in order to reach a fair decision. Even if the sources are weighted (i.e. 50% of the evidence is allotted to the interview) the complete picture should be considered.

87

The panel chair exercises undue influence on the decision.

Action:

While the chair of the panel may have the most interest in the result of the process they need to remember that all panel members are of equal status and entitled to make their contribution.

It is not acceptable for the chair to insist that their view be accepted by the rest of the panel.

88

Not including a dissenting report.

Action:

If a panel member disagrees with the rest of the panel they are entitled to submit a dissenting report. It is then up to the delegate to make a decision based on the information provided.

If you feel strongly that you cannot agree with the decision of the panel then your professionalism and integrity would dictate that you should write a dissenting report

89

Writing inappropriate
comments in the report.

Action:

One test as to whether the report is appropriately written or not is: Would I like this written about me?

Another is: Would I like this reported on the front page of the newspaper?

One value of using a scribe is that they are skilled in writing reports.

Be careful about the use of any pejorative terms or personal comments about applicants. You may well have to justify them to the applicant.

90

Revealing the result before
it is decided.

Action:

The selection panel is not a decision-making body. Once the report has been written the selection process is still not complete until it has been agreed and signed by the delegate.

No one on the selection panel can reveal the recommendation before the delegate has signed the report.

91

Talking about what happened during the process.

Action:

What happens during a selection process is confidential information.

No one on the panel may talk about such details as applicants' interview performance, referee comments or panel discussions.

If you do it's a sure way to undermine trust in the process and erode your own integrity.

92

Not advising applicants of the result of their application.

Action:

Cost cutting can result in eliminating such courtesies as letting applicants know the result of their application.

Such neglect is likely to reduce the attractiveness of your agency.

As a minimum, all applicants should receive some form of notification that either they were not short listed or were unsuccessful.

93

Not letting applicants know they can obtain feedback and how.

Action:

A professional approach to selecting staff includes letting applicants know that they may obtain feedback and how they can go about doing this.

Provide information about obtaining a copy of the relevant section of the report and who they should contact, with contact details, for further feedback.

94

Not taking giving feedback seriously.

Action:

If the chair of the selection panel is the one to give feedback they need to take this role seriously.

Regardless of how difficult and unpalatable it is to give lots of people bad news, it will reflect well on your agency to carry out this role professionally.

Obtain some training. Discuss feedback with panel members before the process is finalised.

95

Not being available to give feedback.

Action:

Some people give lip service to giving feedback but when applicants call they are never available.

Avoiding the role reflects badly on you and your agency.

This is not a time for cowardice.

96

Not being prepared when applicants call for feedback.

Action:

Professional courtesy means that you will be prepared when applicants call. Make a time to discuss feedback so that you can be prepared.

At a minimum have the report in front of you and notes from your discussion with the panel about what feedback will be given.

97

Giving fluffy feedback.

Action:

Fluffy feedback is made up of comments that are so general as to be useless to the applicant.

Examples are: Other applicants were stronger. You didn't perform well at the interview. Your examples weren't good enough.

What the applicant needs are specific comments that help them understand why they weren't selected and what they can do to improve.

98

Not giving useful feedback to internal applicants.

Action:

Internal applicants must receive credible feedback. This is particularly the case if they have been doing the job they applied for.

If the feedback is not convincing not only will they be affected, but all their colleagues, friends and family.

Bad news travels fast. Your reputation will be further tarnished if let down your colleagues.

99

Not inducting successful applicants.

Action:

Regardless of whether the successful applicant is an internal promotion, internal transfer, movement from another agency or appointment of a person from outside the public service, they each deserve some form of induction.

An internal promotion warrants recognition and a discussion to establish expectations. A person from another section needs to understand what your section does. They can bring assumptions that are inaccurate.

The greater the distance between the applicant and the job, the more induction they will need.

100

Waiting for the formal induction process to take place.

Action:

Your agency may offer a formal induction process for new staff. Certainly include this in your induction plans for the successful applicant.

But don't wait for this to take place as a substitute for your own action.

You need to be there to welcome the successful applicant on day one and to show you have anticipated their arrival.

A sure way to increase your chances of losing the new person is to ignore them when they arrive.

101

Asking an unsuccessful applicant to continue acting in the job.

Action:

If a person who has been acting at a certain level applies for a job at that level and is unsuccessful it is not appropriate to then ask them to continue acting at that level.

It is insulting, unfair and unprofessional.

If you think a person acting at a level is unlikely to perform well during the selection process take steps to help them. It reflects poorly all round if someone has been acting for a long time, is told their performance is fine, and then deem them unsuitable during a selection process.

Any more?

Action:

But if you do have one, then drop me a line at:

Heaven forbid that there should be even more ways to erode trust in the process!

Mental Nutrition®
PO Box 4293
Hawker ACT 2614
Australia
Phone: +61 2 6254 5023

More information

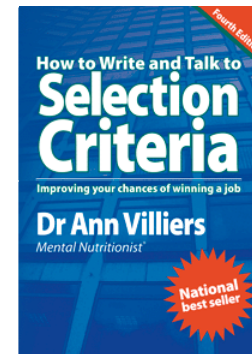
Action:

You can also consider purchasing the authoritative book on selection criteria:

How to Write and Talk to Selection Criteria
(4th edn.) ISBN 0975756109

Go to www.mentalnutrition.com

and look under Selection Criteria for articles, e-courses and other services.



Or talk with Dr Villiers about her program *Recruiting, Selecting and Retaining Staff*.

About Dr Ann Villiers

Dr Ann Villiers is Australia's only *Mental Nutritionist*®.

A consultant, speaker and author Ann specialises in unravelling the mysteries of selection processes and building skillful applicants and selection panels.

You can contact Dr Villiers at:

Mental Nutrition®
PO Box 4293
Hawker ACT 2614
Australia

Phone: +61 2 6254 5023

www.mentalnutrition.com

