

# Alternatives to Conventional Interviews: Some Hints & Resources<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The conventional interview processes typically used to employ staff are sometimes inadequate for filling positions in the human services.

However, applicants will generally assume that your selection process will be conventional. It is therefore important that you clearly articulate your intentions to applicants; otherwise, you run the risk of being accused of an unfair process. (It is also worth checking any unconventional process with the relevant union and your local employer's association, to ensure that it meets all criteria for a fair appointment.)

This handout provides some practical ideas on alternate methods you might use and how to communicate your intentions to applicants for a position.

**WARNING ... the purpose of an interview should be to give candidates an opportunity to perform ... to demonstrate their strengths!** Do not be tempted to use unconventional selection processes in order to try to *trick* applicants or create the kind of pressure that may lead to poor performance. This is more likely to demonstrate candidates' reaction to stress than the job-related competencies you aim to assess, and therefore defeats the purpose of using a non-conventional approach.

## Prior to Interviews

It is important that the Selection Panel make clear decisions about:

1. What the key Selection Criteria are.
2. Whether differential weighting is to be allocated to particular Criteria.
3. How best to find out whether applicants meet these Criteria.

It is not uncommon to have Selection Criteria that require that applicants can **demonstrate** particular competencies. Yet, conventional selection processes rarely allow this to occur ... candidates, or their referees, may **talk about** their abilities, but the Selection Panel rarely get to see these in practice until after appointment. Often, this means that selection is based on the **marketing/communication competencies or self confidence** of candidates, rather than any actual assessment of the required competencies.

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Ideally, firm decisions about Selection Criteria should be made, and ideas on possible processes canvassed, prior to finalising the Job Description for a position. This allows the Panel to include *protective/indicative* comments in the initial material sent to potential candidates. For example, the section on selection may include:

*A decision to offer an applicant a position is based on assessment of both written material and a face-to-face selection process. Applicants will be required to demonstrate competency in respect to the Selection Criteria for the position. This may include a requirement that they actually show these competencies functioning during the Selection Process or that they give and discuss examples of their abilities relevant to the position.*

This particular wording allows for a range of different processes, and would be particularly useful where the Panel have not yet finalised their approach. Often, it is better to save the final decisions on process until the Panel has a sense of the characteristics of a particular field of applicants. (This allows the Panel to *tailor the process to fit the field.*)

## Deciding Your Selection Method(s)

Any given selection process may employ one or more of the methods outlined in this handout. They may be used exclusively, or in conjunction with a conventional interview. If using more than one method, it can be useful to begin with a wider short-listed field than would normally be possible with an *interview-only* approach, and progressively refine the shortlist. (This can result in conducting a smaller number of individual interviews than might otherwise have been the case.)

### Some alternate methods for assessing the competencies of candidates are:

1. Conducting a group interview with short-listed candidates.
2. Requiring detailed commentary on each of the selection criteria in the initial written application.
3. Asking short-listed candidates to complete a written exercise related to the position.
4. Inviting short-listed candidates to do a *sample day* of work in the agency.
5. Taking short-listed candidates for a tour of the agency.
6. Demonstrating particular competencies as part of an individual interview.

Each of the above suggestions may enable a Panel to see some of the skills of applicants, rather than just hearing individual perceptions of their competencies.

**It is important that the methods chosen relate to the Selection Criteria for the position and, possibly, the Panel's initial *best guess* about what they would need to know in order to be able to distinguish the candidates.** Methods used can be tailored to:

- Address all Selection Criteria, or,
- Target those Selection Criteria with greatest weight/importance, or,
- Target those Selection Criteria which would appear to be the most difficult to distinguish between existing short-listed candidates.

### **Example 1:**

A Director of a Peak Body may be required to deal with the media, without warning, on volatile issues. In this case, it would be legitimate to use a process that requires candidates to demonstrate their ability to operate *on their feet*, under considerable pressure, in relation to a highly contentious issue. Giving them considerable warning or preparation time would reduce the realism of the exercise. **(A Group Interview, with 5 minutes to consider a scenario before beginning, might be appropriate here.)**

### **Example 2:**

A group work position may require the ability to design training programs. It wouldn't be unusual, in the position, for someone to need to develop a 1 day program with a day's notice. In this case, it would be legitimate to use a process that gave candidates advance notice, and time to develop their thinking before having to present it. It would not be appropriate to demand a program outline in less than 24 hours - although hearing their *first thinking* on one or more relevant topics could be legitimately included as a scenario within an individual interview. **(An exercise outline including a workshop topic, sent out 24 hours prior to an Individual Interview, with an opportunity to give a presentation at the commencement of the Interview, might be appropriate here. The exercise may include both presenting a program outline to the Panel, and presenting an excerpt of the program as though the Panel were program participants.)**

Regardless of the processes used, it is critical that the Panel clearly explain their rationale for an alternate process to candidates and provide details of the proposed process (including any time they will be required to put aside), well prior to the process being implemented.

## **Group Interviews**

*Group Interviews* allow a Selection Panel to consider a wider field of candidates than might otherwise be possible.

A group interview is an opportunity for each candidate, in a group with other candidates, to demonstrate their abilities relevant to a position. Typically, the process involves either:

- **A problem solving role play.** A typical situation likely to be faced by a worker in the position is outlined. Candidates undertake a practical exercise designed to solve the problem. Or,
- **A problem solving discussion.** Candidates hold an open discussion on the topic.

The scenarios/issues used must be designed to enable applicants to demonstrate or identify competencies related to Selection Criteria for the position. Throughout the exercise, the Panel observes the group of candidates. Individual Panel members may debrief an exercise, time keep and/or provide input on the process.

Group interviews are a means of practically testing whether candidates have the competencies they claim. Assuming all candidates have some ability, **group interviews are particularly useful in identifying the relative sophistication of each applicant's competencies.** Some candidates might use the opportunity to propose a number of different possible ways to approach a problem, and, in the process, demonstrate practical knowledge in a number of areas covered in the Selection Criteria for a position. Others might simply repeat ideas and/or followed a single line of reasoning.

The following is an example timetable for a Selection Process. In this situation, a single day is put aside for making the selection. A group interview in the morning (with 4 - 12 candidates) provides a basis for further short-listing of candidates for conventional interviews with individuals in the afternoon/evening.

<b>A 1 DAY SELECTION PROCESS - TIMETABLE</b>	
<b>Time</b>	<b>Tasks</b>
9 a.m.	Selection Panel meets to finalise details and make practical preparations for the Day.
9.30 a.m.	Applicants arrive. Process of Day is briefly reiterated <sup>2</sup> , including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ their need to be available until 12 noon for a 2.5 hour group process, and,</li> <li>▪ a request that they call a nominated person at 1 p.m. to be informed of their Individual Interview time.</li> </ul> Applicants are briefly introduced to each other and Panel members, and invited to get to know each other over coffee, for 15 minutes.

<sup>2</sup> The assumption here is that they have previously been thoroughly informed about the intended process, in writing.

9.45 a.m.	<p>Everyone is re-introduced.  More detailed information about the process is reiterated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How the Selection Criteria have been weighted, and key themes in the exercises.</li> <li>▪ The timing/structure of the Group Interview (eg. <i>This process will involve two scenarios designed to enable you to demonstrate your HRM and other communication competencies. There will be 2 x 45 minute blocks with a break between. Each 45 minutes block will include 5 minutes reading time, a 20 minute exercise and 20 minute debrief. There will be a break between the two scenarios, where you will not be observed.</i>)</li> <li>▪ That Selection Panel members will be sitting outside the group and taking notes throughout the process.</li> <li>▪ That the Selection Panel will make a decision about who to pursue an Individual Interview with, but that an appointment would be scheduled with each applicant (regardless of whether they were going to be individually interviewed, and that unsuccessful candidates would be provided with feedback at that time).</li> </ul>
9.55 a.m.	<p><b>Group Interview - Round 1</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 5 minutes reading time of a pre-written scenario</li> <li>2. 20 minute exercise.</li> <li>3. 20 minute debrief: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Their reactions to the exercise.</li> <li>▪ Identification of where the group got to.</li> <li>▪ Discussion about why this outcome occurred.</li> <li>▪ An opportunity for each candidate to talk about their role - things they liked about what they did, and things they'd do differently next time.</li> <li>▪ Any other comments they'd like to make.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
10.40 a.m.	BREAK
10.55 a.m.	<p><b>Group Interview - Round 2</b>  (Same process as for Round 1.)</p>
11.40 p.m.	<p>Wind-up and reminder to call at 1 p.m. for Individual Interview time. (20 minutes' spare time is available to deal with any dilemmas, or the program running overtime.)</p>
12 noon	<p><b>SELECTION PANEL MEETS</b> to decide on further short-listing and finalise timetable for Individuals Interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 15 minutes for feedback to unsuccessful candidates</li> <li>▪ 45 minutes for full interview for successful candidates</li> <li>▪ 15 minute break between interviews</li> </ul> <p>Interview Timetable is given to the contact person.</p>
1.00 p.m.	LUNCH
2.00 p.m.	<p><b>SELECTION PANEL MEETS</b> to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Make final decisions about nature of feedback to unsuccessful candidates.</li> <li>▪ Refine (pre-planned) interview questions, to address issues indicated through the Group Interview.</li> </ul>
2.30 p.m.	Begin <b>INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS</b>
???	<b>SELECTION PANEL MEETS</b> to make final decisions.

**Attachment 1** is an example of the sort of flyer that could be sent out to short-listed candidates, upon being informed that they are invited to a Group Interview. **Attachment 2** is an example of the sorts of scenarios that could be used during group interviews ... in this case, for the Director of a Peak Body.

## Other Alternate Approaches

### Written Tasks

Like group interviews, written responses have the advantage of enabling a Selection Panel to assess a much wider field of candidates than they could interview individually. Whilst less threatening to applicants than a group interview, written material tends to allow demonstration of a narrower band of competencies (eg. personal reflection, critical analysis, presentation and writing skills). Therefore, it is best applied to positions where these abilities are amongst the Selection Criteria.

#### ***Option 1 - Address Selection Criteria in Initial Application***

It can be useful to require quite a detailed commentary on each Criterion - resulting in *longer than usual* position applications. This requirement is likely to quickly distinguish the more motivated applicants and result in more focused applications. It tends to make the short-listing process clearer.

#### ***Option 2 - Short-listed Candidates Complete an Additional Written Exercise***

This is generally most useful when implemented before any face-to-face process. Short-listed candidates are to write something related to specific (generally particularly important) Selection Criteria. For example:

- 500 words on how the values of the organisation would affect their practice. This would provide insight into the writing, presentation, critical thinking, ethics and philosophy of the applicant. (This option clearly relies on the organisation already having clearly articulated agency values.)
- 1 page responses to a number of scenarios or tasks (eg. *The first 6 things I would do if faced with the above situation are ...; The main things the agency would need to consider when developing a Youth Participation Policy are ...*). Again, this provides an insight into the thinking and writing skills of the applicant ... but doesn't guarantee that they could enact the theory they present!

### On-Site Assessment

#### ***Option 1 - Short-listed Candidates do a Sample Day of Work***

Here, candidates are invited to do a *sample day* of work in the agency. For this to have any value as an assessment tool, it is critical that formal observation, debriefing and feedback are built into the process.

This approach is particularly vulnerable to exploitation of candidates and/or *speculative* (rather than criteria-based) reactions to candidates. It is important that either:

- Panel member(s) play the key role in assessment of the candidate, or,

- Staff and/or client feedback is **only** through a pre-set proforma which seeks feedback **only** on relevant Selection Criteria for the position.

### **Option 2 - Short-listed Candidates Participate in an Agency Tour**

This can be a particularly appropriate way to involve agency clients or potential co-workers in the selection process. An *Advisory Panel* of clients and/or co-workers conduct a fairly prolonged tour, which may include time to sit down with a cup of tea. The Advisory Panel provides formal feedback to the Panel on their observations of applicants in key criteria areas - eg. their ability to interact with clients in a manner appropriate to the agency; their ability to interact effectively with the variety of workers in the staff team (**assuming** that these are Selection Criteria for the position).

Ideally, clients (or part time workers) are paid as *Consultants* for their efforts. If a tour is seen as the first phase of an interview process, the Advisory Panel can be paid for a day's work, and tours can be timetabled to cover the period during which the previous applicant is being interviewed by the Panel.

As always, it is critical that candidates attend the selection process with clear advance information on how long it will take, and what will be involved.

### **Practical Exercise within Individual Interview**

This is where candidates are asked to demonstrate particular competencies as part of their interview. Examples, related to different types of positions might be:

- Prepare training program on a particular topic (for a training position).
- Do initial advocacy plan in response to a pre-set scenario (for an advocacy position).
- Give a speech to an imaginary audience on a pre-set topic (for a position with a strong *public face* component).
- Prepare a media release and role play a press conference - with Panel members as media (for a senior political/lobbying position).

Clearly, in these types of exercises, **candidates will need to be given their task in advance** - generally allowing the amount of time they would typically have to complete the task, in the position. Where Selection Criteria require existing knowledge of the topics involved, no further information should be provided. Where particular knowledge is not a pre-requisite, background information should be provided (and sufficient time allowed for applicants to absorb and process this).

Where the exercise requires role play, people from outside the Panel may participate in this part of the interview (with Panel observing). Again, this might be a useful way to include clients, co-workers or other stakeholders. **If any form of role play is required** the same amount of time should be allowed for debriefing the exercise, as was spent on the exercise itself. Debriefing should occur before the interview continues. (Sometimes, a 2 phase interview is a useful way to go.)

## Follow-Up of Applicants

Regardless of the adequacy of preparation for candidates, using alternate selection processes can be exciting (thus generating feedback) or threatening (thus requiring some sort of *finishing off* /debriefing process). Candidates are likely to have ideas on how the process could be improved. One way to achieve both these goals is to invite written feedback following the process.

**Attachment 3** is an example of a follow-up questionnaire which could be sent to candidates.

### Ideas for Advance Flyer to Shortlisted Candidates re: Interview Day Expectations

#### Congratulations!

You have been short-listed for the position of .....  
at A.D.A. The Selection Panel has chosen to use an interview process which is a little unusual. That's why we are providing further details about our selection process, so you can better prepare for the *Interview Day*.

#### All stages of the Interview Day will be held at:

**Australian Disability Association  
Level 14  
212-220 Smith Street  
CANBERRA  
ph: (02) 6239-5571.**

**The Interview Day is ..... You should ensure that you are available for the full day**, as your Individual Appointment could be scheduled for any time between 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.

#### **Stage 1 - Group Interview (10.30 a.m. - 12.30 p.m.)**

The Selection Panel is interested in actually **seeing** you demonstrate some key competencies relevant to this position, rather than just hearing you talk about them. At the Group Interview, we will be particularly focusing on those Selection Criteria related to your interpersonal skills.

**All short-listed candidates are invited to this Group Interview.** You will be asked to work together on 2 different exercises, with the Selection Panel observing. Overall, the exercises will provide you with an opportunity to name and/or demonstrate your competencies (that is, your skills, knowledge, attitudes and values) related to all Selection Criteria for the position. The exercise will be based on problem solving scenarios relevant to the position.

Each exercise will take 45 minutes:

- Initially - you will receive a brief written outline of the exercise.
- 5 minutes - quiet reading time for you to consider the exercise.
- 20 minutes - doing the exercise jointly with other candidates.
- 20 minutes - debriefing/discussing the exercise.

Prior to Exercise 1, you will have 15 minutes during which you can get to know the other candidates and have a coffee. There is a 15 minute break between Exercises 1 and 2 where you are welcome to do as you please. You will not be observed during this time. You are welcome to talk with other candidates ... or just go for a walk on your own and clear your head!

**Stage 2 - Individual Appointment (at a time to be scheduled between 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.)**

All applicants who participated in the Group Interview will be scheduled for an individual appointment with the Selection Panel. **You are required to ring Bruce, at the A.D.A., at 1.30 p.m., for details of your appointment time.**

Following the Group Interview, the Selection Panel will meet. They will decide which candidates they wish to further consider:

- Unsuccessful candidates will have a 15 minute session during which they will be provided with brief feedback.
- Candidates being further considered will have a 45-60 minute interview.

**We look forward to meeting you on .....**

If you have any queries, please contact Bruce on (02) 6239-5571.

## Attachment 2

### Possible Scenarios for Group Interview for Director position in a (Fictitious) Disability Peak Body.

#### Scenario 1

There is currently no Director of the Australian Disability Association. You are an equal member of the A.D.A. staff team.

The Federal Minister for Disability Services has announced, without warning, that the A.D.A. will no longer be funded, as of close of business tomorrow.

You have already received several phone calls from the media, seeking comment.

**What is your plan of action?**

**NOTE:** This scenario would be appropriate for a position where the following are selection criteria for the position:

- Demonstrated ability to deal with media.
- Sound understanding of government funding processes in the disability sector.
- Demonstrated capacity to work under pressure.

#### Scenario 2

You are collectively Director of the A.D.A.

Management Committee have handed down a decision that the A.D.A. will focus on issues affecting people with disability in rural areas for the next financial year. 80% of A.D.A. resources will be devoted to this target group during this period. (20% will be devoted to maintaining other A.D.A. functions.)

2 staff strongly support the decision; 2 are strongly opposed.

**What would you do?**

**NOTE:** This scenario would be appropriate for a position where the following are selection criteria for the position:

- Demonstrated ability to process conflict.
- Willingness and ability to work to, and resource, a management committee.
- High order staff management skills.

