A brief guide

Providing feedback to job applicants after interview

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Introduction

The NSW Government delivers world class public services and, as the largest employer in Australia, competes for the best talent.

Our aims are to attract a diverse range of people to apply and to select the person best suited to the role and the needs of the agency.

Giving candidates actionable feedback in a helpful and encouraging way will leave a lasting impression on the people who may be our customers or future employees.

1.1 Purpose of this guide

Providing good feedback is one of the most important things to do in the recruitment process.

This brief guide provides advice for hiring managers and recruiters preparing to give feedback to candidates in the recruitment process. For the purpose of this guide, the recruitment process includes recruitment actions to fill a new or existing role advertising for ongoing, temporary or fixed term roles and internal movements such as secondments and transfers.

1.2 Recruitment in the NSW Public Sector

The NSW public sector recruits employees based on merit with the objective of selecting the person best suited to the role and the needs of the agency. We advertise widely to attract a competitive and diverse field of candidates and use multiple assessments to determine who has the capabilities, knowledge and experience needed for the role.[1]

Recruitment and Selection Guide

The NSW Public Service Commission's Recruitment and Selection Guide is a best practice guide on how to manage the recruitment process including:

- Effective planning for your recruitment and selection approach – covers how to create a positive candidate experience, promote diversity and inclusion and prevent discrimination in the recruitment process.

- Reviewing the resume and application – covers how to pre-screen and shortlist applications for interview, minimise bias and document your decisions.

- Consolidating results and making selection decisions – guidance on how to systematically review assessment results (comparative and suitability) and document your decisions.

Top Tip!

Confirm with your HR business partner who is going to be the contact point for candidates and who will give feedback to ensure you're both clear on who is doing what and when.

Top Tip!

Identify a few key strengths and areas for development for each candidate to help you give feedback later on.

[1] Capabilities, knowledge and experience make up the 'pre-established standards' for a role and are required to be assessed as part of a comparative or suitability assessment.

NSW Public Sector Capability Framework

The NSW Public Sector Capability Framework describes the capabilities needed to perform work effectively. Capabilities describe the core knowledge, skills and abilities needed to do a role. They apply to all public sector employees, across all levels and occupational groups.

Top Tip!

Documenting your selection decisions against the capability framework will help you to provide factual, specific and actionable feedback to candidates.

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Why good feedback matters

"We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve."

— **Bill Gates**

There are a number of reasons why good feedback matters:

2.1 Good candidate care

Generally, the first a candidate gets to hear about their unsuccessful application is by letter or email and these tend to be both impersonal and non-specific.

Providing feedback is good candidate care; it demonstrates that you value the person, appreciate the time they have taken to participate in your recruitment process and reinforces the value of the NSW public sector.

2.2 It's the smart thing to do

Providing good feedback is the smart thing to do from an agency perspective as unsuccessful candidates may be suitable for future vacancies and may form an important source of future pipeline talent for your agency.

2.3 Enhance employer of choice

Providing good feedback can improve your agency's reputation as an employer of choice.

A recent study of NSW public sector recruitment found that most applicants report not receiving feedback on their applications and are very dissatisfied with the feedback they do receive.[2] The study found that small improvements to candidate care, such as the provision of feedback, had significant impact, including increased satisfaction with the recruitment process, increased likelihood of referring a friend (e.g. generated positive word-of-mouth) and increased candidates' optimism about getting the next job.

2.4 Actionable feedback can improve career development

Actionable feedback (clear and tactical information about what to do), can have a positive impact on career development – enabling candidates to learn from their experience and improve for next time. However, research suggests that the actions and specific development required to be ready for promotion for example, are not always made clear. This is particularly true for women.[3]

[2] NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet Behavioural Insights Unit. Available at: *Simple behavioural insights interventions significantly reduce the gender gap in recruitment.*

[3] Bain & Company Inc, Chief Executive Women Advancing Women in Australia: Eliminating Bias in Feedback and Promotions, (2017).

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Diversity matters

Good feedback requires us to tackle our biases. This matters if we are to leverage and benefit from the diversity of talent available and have a workforce that reflects the community we serve.

3.1 Good feedback requires us to tackle our biases

The recruitment process relies on human decisions and evidence from behavioural science suggests that the way we make recruitment decisions can be biased in a number of ways.[4] In a similar way, the nature and impact of feedback can also unintentionally vary.

Check your bias. Be conscious of the language you use in giving feedback and challenge yourself to give feedback based on facts gathered in the recruitment process (e.g. capabilities for the role) and not assumptions.

One way to gain greater awareness about biases, preferences and beliefs is to take the Implicit Association Test (select Australian setting).[5]

Click here to take
the Harvard Implicit
Association Test.

[4] NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet Behavioural Insights Unit – Behavioural Approaches to increasing Workforce diversity August 2016. Available at:
https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/workplace-culture---diversity/diversity-and-inclusion.
[5] 11 Min Read – Avoiding Unconscious bias at work, Avoiding accidental discrimination – MindTools. Available at: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/avoiding-unconscious-bias.htm.

3.2 Specific and actionable feedback matters to all

Providing all candidates with specific and actionable feedback on their performance can help reduce differences between those who are confident in their skills and those who are not.[6] This can be particularly relevant in the recruitment process when self-confidence can often take a knock for the candidate who was unsuccessful.[7]

However, research suggests not all feedback is given equally.

Women

Differences have been identified in the feedback provided to women and men:

- women are told more frequently than men that they need to display "more confidence" and need "more experience" to be promoted, but

- women are less likely to receive clear and actionable feedback than men.

Bain & Company Inc, (2017) Chief Executive Women Advancing Women in Australia: Eliminating Bias in Feedback and Promotions.

Correll, S., & Simard, C. (2016). Vague feedback is holding women back. Harvard Business Review.

On the positive side, women are more likely to:

- report feedback changed their likelihood to apply again in the future compared to men

- be responsive to encouraging feedback because they have been shown to undervalue their skills and experience relative to equally qualified men.

NSW Behavioural Insights Unit (2019) – Applying behavioural insights to drive public sector diversity.

NSW Behavioural Insights Unit (2020) – Simple behavioural insights interventions significantly reduce the gender gap in recruitment.

[6] Behavioural Insights Unit – Applying behavioural insights to drive public sector diversity (2019). Available at: https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/workplace-culture---diversity/diversity-and-inclusion.
[7] Known as the peak-end rule, our tendency to judge an experience is based on how we felt during its emotional peak and at its end. In recruitment, the emotional peak is often an interview, and the end for most candidates tends to be a generic email advising that their application was not successful. (See Kahneman, D. (2000). Evaluation by moments: Past and future. Choices, values, and frames, 693-708. Available at: http://www.vwl.tuwien.ac.at/hanappi/TEI/momentsfull.pdf).

Older candidates

A national Inquiry found discrimination against older people at different stages of the recruitment process, including gaining feedback.[8]

Common findings included:

- calls to employers often went unreturned, or were limited to generic unconvincing sounding feedback such as "the standard of applications was of a very high calibre and unfortunately you did not score as highly on our selection criteria as the successful applicant"

- using terminology such as they were not successful because they "did not fit the workplace culture"

- evidence of age being requested and the general lack of interest from interview panels once the applicant's age was apparent.

"Ageism is rife in recruitment. I am 45 years old and have now been unemployed for 2 years, 7 months… I often get feedback after interviews that I am "too experienced", which is surely code for ageism."[9]

Top Tip!

Providing all candidates with actionable feedback, based on the facts gathered, can help to drive bias out of the feedback process and enable candidates to learn from their experience and improve for next time.

[8] Australian Human Rights Commission (2016) Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability. Available at: https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/publications.

[9] Confidential Submission 95 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability (9 September 2015).

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How to provide good feedback

"Maybe it is just me being naïve, but I feel like sometimes the feedback is just so that they have given you something and they have ticked a box. Like I find there is no merit. There is nothing that I could take and run with."

— NSW Government employee
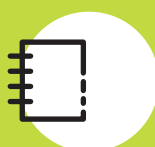
4.1 Plan ahead and be prepared

Good feedback requires you to be well prepared for the conversation.

These are a few things you can do:

Be timely.

The sooner you provide feedback, the fresher and more effective it will be for both of you.

Communicate effectively.

Check the candidate's communication preferences and accessibility requirements. For bulk recruitments use an online scheduling system for optimum flexibility.

Review the role description.

Refresh your understanding of what 'good' looked like for the role by reviewing the job description and capabilities set for the role.

Review all relevant documents.

Identify the candidate's top strengths and areas for improvement taking into consideration the capabilities set for the role. Have these documents at hand when giving your feedback.

4.2 Be positive and realistic

When giving feedback it's a good idea to start off with the positives before addressing the areas where the candidate could have done better. Let them know where they did well, be authentic in your praise and why you were impressed.

Focus on using positive language in your feedback. Rather than saying "you didn't…", say "next time you could…".

Give feedback that candidates can realistically work on, that they can fix and control. Providing feedback that is out of the candidate's control is unlikely to be helpful.

4.3 Offer specific and actionable feedback

From the candidate's perspective receiving specific and actionable feedback provides an opportunity for them to grow their career if they are provided with useful information that can help them do better next time.

Inspire the candidate by sharing specific and actionable things they can do to address the development areas you have identified.

Avoid vague generic sounding statements and challenge yourself to base feedback on facts – the capabilities, knowledge and experience for the role you assessed.

Remember, providing candidates with specific and actionable feedback can help to drive bias out of the feedback process[10] and encourage candidates to improve for next time.
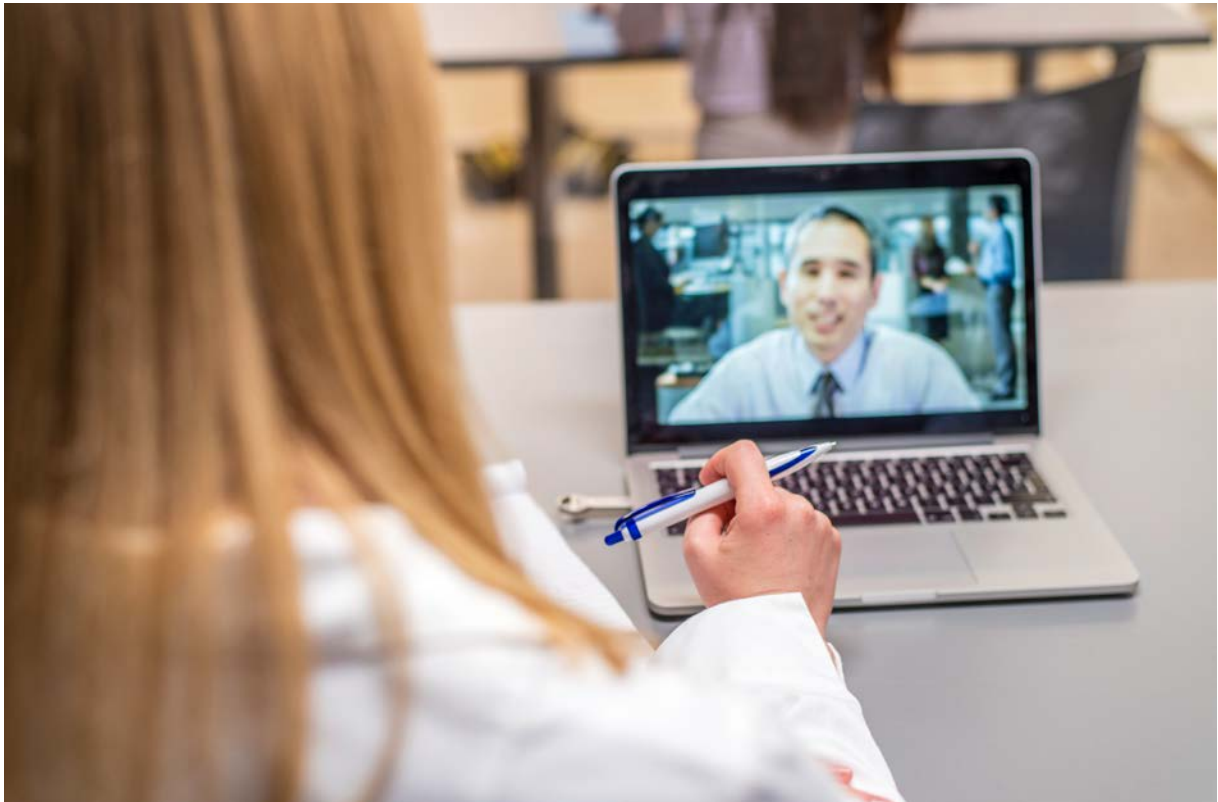
[10] Correll, S., & Simard, C. (2016). Vague feedback is holding women back. Harvard Business Review.

4.4 Be thoughtful

Consider the candidate's individual circumstances and how best to gain their understanding, acceptance and buy-in to the feedback.

For example, ask them how they found the recruitment process to identify whether they had any particular difficulties that will help you frame your feedback.

When describing relative strengths and development areas, check-in with them – "Does this resonate with you?".

Always thank candidates for the time and effort they gave to the recruitment process. Saying thank you shows your appreciation.

4.5 What to do when feedback doesn't go well

Most feedback will be received positively but there may be times when a candidate disagrees with your feedback or even becomes upset. For feedback to have a positive impact it will be important that the candidate feels they have been heard.

Actively listening to what the candidate is saying is important. This can include, creating opportunities for them to respond so you have the whole story (pausing), using expanders (asking for examples), checking your understanding by paraphrasing what they have said or seeking clarification and acknowledging their feelings.

Top Tips!

- **Listen to the candidate's concerns and acknowledge them.**

- **Stay calm and be objective – don't argue.**

- **Let the candidate express their feelings without interruption (they may just want to be heard).**

- **Offer a follow up meeting if the candidate is too distressed.**

- **Close the conversation while remaining respectful to their point of view by focusing on the future.**

For more information on active listening follow this link.

4.6 A feedback scenario

The planning stage

You have confirmed what 'good' looks like, the capabilities the candidate demonstrated for the role and areas for development;

1. Very strong examples on managing a complex procurement process and stakeholder management and communication (met these capabilities).

2. Struggled to provide an example of a complex project that involved data analysis to inform delivery of a strategic policy initiative (Think and Solve – Not Met). Notes confirm they had studied statistics and were passionate about evidence-based policy.

The feedback stage

1. Set the tone – thank you

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the recruitment process. I appreciate you invested in it and I'm keen to give you some actionable feedback following on from your interview.

I'm going to go over a specific area of feedback I think will be helpful for you, this relates to the policy experience we were looking for – how does that sound? Are there any areas you would like to explore?

[Pause. Give the candidate an opportunity to respond].

2. Be positive

I want to start off by congratulating you on getting to the final stage of the recruitment process, it was a very competitive process. At the interview we enjoyed hearing about all the great work you have done. You particularly impressed us with your knowledge of the procurement process and the practical examples you gave us were spot on. We were also impressed with the communication skills you demonstrated in the answers to questions on managing stakeholders and influencing others. These areas are clearly strengths and you met these capabilities.

3. Provide specific and actionable feedback

You may recall one of the focus capabilities for this role was Think and Solve Problems and one of the requirements in the job description was working with data to inform policy. You could strengthen your response next time by stepping through how you used data to understand a problem and inform a solution.

We noted your qualifications and were impressed by the passion you have for data informing policy. If this is an area that you want to pursue, think about some examples which demonstrate you have the capabilities, skill and experience in this area. Alternatively, consider asking your manager to give you more exposure to data analysis and policy development in your current role.

See the Quick Tips for giving good feedback to help you prepare for good feedback.

4. Actively listen

[Pause. Give the candidate an opportunity to respond].

ABS run some great courses in data analysis in policy application – this could be something to explore too? I can send you the link.

[Pause. Give the candidate an opportunity to respond].

5. Be thoughtful

Is there anything you'd like to ask about the interview? Do you have feedback for us?

6. Finish on an encouraging note

You've clearly got great strengths. Like we've discussed, to move into this type of role look at building your data analytical skills into the policy development cycle. Also, if you are interested, keep looking for opportunities to work for us. Are your job preferences up to date on Iwork for NSW? Thanks so much for applying, it was a pleasure to meet you. All the best.

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Quick tips

5.1 Apply the SMARTT principles

Acronym	Description
Specific	Be specific, factual and objective. Vague feedback that doesn't address a particular issue may not be easily understood.
Measurable	Suggest quantifiable attainable actions for the candidate.
Actionable	Provide actionable and tactical tips on how to develop and improve.
Realistic	Give achievable feedback that candidates can realistically work on. Pick the top two or three specific development areas.
Timely	Give feedback in a timely manner. The sooner you provide feedback, the fresher it will be in both of your minds.
Thoughtful	Consider the candidate's individual circumstances and how best to gain their understanding, acceptance and buy-in to the feedback.

Based on SMARTT tips to giving clear feedback from Bain and Company, Inc and Chief Executive Women – *Advancing Women in Australia: Eliminating Bias in Feedback and Promotions, 2017.*

5.2 Dos and Don'ts checklist

DO or DON'T	Description
DO be prepared	Review the job description, capabilities for the role and advertisement. Review your interview notes, assessment results and other relevant documents and have them at hand. Identify the top things you'd like to provide feedback on. Identify specific and actionable things the candidate can do to improve or do differently for next time.
DO be timely	Provide your feedback as soon as practicable. Understand the candidate's needs, communication preferences and accessibility requirements. Allow enough time for you and the candidate to have a quality conversation. Reserve a quiet private place so you won't be interrupted.
DO be positive	Start by being positive – set the tone. • *Thank you for making time to meet with me. I am really pleased to give you this feedback and want to be as helpful as I can.* Focus on using positive language in your feedback. Rather than saying "you didn't...", say "next time you could...". Avoid the use of 'but' as this may be perceived as negative. • *Firstly, you provided us with strong examples of customer service and communication and easily met these capabilities for the role. We were looking for someone who could use data to inform policy. Next time, you could focus on demonstrating how data could be used to inform recommendations for actions. One suggestion I have for you to improve is to get exposure to projects where you are using data to help find solutions for policy issues.*

DO or DON'T	Description
DO give specific & actionable advice	Provide feedback that is specific and actionable and avoid clichés and generalisations. Draw on the candidate's application or interview to show you are offering authentic insights. • *Being able to manage complex projects with multiple deadlines is a critical aspect of the role and part of the focus capabilities. For your development, you could seek exposure to these types of projects to develop your project management capabilities.* • *Take a look at the PSC's Capability Discovery Tool – it may help you understand the capability and development needs we've discussed.*
DO be attentive	Anticipate the candidate's needs and prepare your feedback accordingly. • *I appreciate you may be disappointed that you didn't get this role. I want to help you understand why by providing you with specific feedback on how you demonstrated the capabilities – both strengths and areas for development.* Actively listen and provide the candidate an opportunity to ask questions. When describing relative strengths and development areas, check in with the candidate – "Does this resonate with you?". • *Do you have any further questions? Is there anything you would like me to cover again?*
DO check your bias	Check your feedback is not influenced by personal assumptions, bias or stereotypes.

DO or DON'T	Description
DO be thoughtful & encouraging	Treat the candidate with respect and thank them for their time. Encourage all candidates to look for roles that are suited to them and top candidates to apply for similar roles in the future. For those in your talent pool, explain what this means. • *While you weren't successful for this role, we do have encouraging news! You were assessed as meeting the capabilities for the role and we've placed you in our talent pool. This means if a similar role in our agency comes up in the next 12 months, we may contact you to discuss the opportunity and this could lead to an offer of employment.*
DO be customer focused	Use the opportunity to invite feedback from the candidate about their experience of the recruitment process.
DON'T use raw test scores	Use rating scale descriptors when giving feedback on tests or assessments.[11] Stay within your scope of expertise. Only give feedback on cognitive ability test or personality questionnaires if you are qualified to do so. • *I'm not qualified to provide you with the information you have requested but I'll arrange to have someone qualified talk to you about your test results.*
DON'T disclose	Speak in general terms about what 'good' looked like rather than commenting or comparing with other candidates' performance. • *On this occasion, we were looking for someone with customer service experience in a challenging work environment. For your next interview, you could develop a more in-depth example of a time when you managed a complex customer service situation.* Check with HR if you don't know what information you can disclose (e.g. Where did I rank? What was my score? How many applied?).

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[11] Clear standards and a consistent rating approach lead to a reliable assessment process and fair and defensible selection decisions. See for example PSC's <u>Setting the assessment standards and rating approach</u>.

DO or DON'T	Description
DON'T argue	In the event the candidate argues with your feedback, stay calm, professional and actively listen. Often a difficult conversation goes wrong because of the emotions involved. Have a strategy to close the conversation while remaining respectful to the candidate's point of view. • *I can hear you found the recruitment process frustrating and I appreciate this has been hard for you.* • *Is there anything we could do to improve your experience in the future?* • *Thank you for your feedback, I wish you all the best for the future.*