Work References in Recruitment and Selection

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Work References are a common assessment method utilized by most organizations in their recruitment and selection processes. Work references are based on the principle that the past performance of an individual is highly predictive of their future performance. Organizations obtain information from the candidate's prior employers regarding relevant aspects of their work performance so as to get a perspective of how well the candidate would perform in the available job position.

Although this may appear to be a valuable selection tool for assessing candidates and seem to provide important information regarding their past performance, it is critical to be aware of the inherent limitations of such a method of assessment. Candidates who apply for job positions are likely to have a vested interest to market themselves to the organization and to ultimately obtain the job position that they were applying for. With this in mind, work references that the candidates provide are likely to be work references that would portray them in a favourable light. The result of this limits the validity and reliability of work references as a recruitment and selection assessment method.

Organizations who utilize work references as a significant component of their recruitment process need to keep this in mind when evaluating candidates. One way of ensuring that work references are more valid is to ask behaviour based questions regarding the relevant areas of the candidate's past performance and obtain specific examples of situations which highlight the action that was taken by the candidate along with the final outcome. This provides a more accurate portrayal of the candidate's past performance as it highlights specific references regarding the work behaviours that the candidate has demonstrated in the past.