



Creating effective merit lists

Overview

This fact sheet is designed for selection panels and hiring managers seeking information on how to effectively create merit lists to maximise value for agencies and candidates. It also assists Human Resources practitioners providing advice on the creation of effective merit lists in their agency. For the purpose of this fact sheet the term merit list is used to refer to the various types of merit lists created by agencies, including ranked merit lists, merit pools and ranked merit pools (as defined in section 5 of the *Public Service Regulations 2023*).

A merit list is a list of candidates who:

- have been assessed as suitable following a merit-based selection process **and**
- selected by the agency to be placed on the merit list.

While candidates may be assessed as suitable against the role requirements, a panel may decide not to place all suitable candidates on a merit list to manage the size and purpose of the list. The section [Merit list size](#) later in this fact sheet provides more information.

To support transparency and fairness, the [APS Merit Principle](#) requires agencies to determine the aim and purpose of a selection process in advance. This should include considering if a merit list may be created. This enables the process to be designed in alignment with the purpose, including appropriate and transparent use of any merit list created.

Creating an effective merit list

An effective merit list:

- meets the current and future needs of the agency

- is an appropriate size for anticipated use of the list by the agency and for similar vacancies
- only includes candidates the agency would be satisfied offering an immediate or future vacancy to.

Future use of merit list

To create an effective merit list, agencies should consider the purpose of the merit list and how it will be used to fill future vacancies. This can help inform decisions about the size and composition of the merit list, while recognising agencies may need to adapt their approach based on the quality and quantity of applications received. The section [Managing candidates' expectations](#) provides more information.

This includes considering:

- the number of roles likely to be filled immediately and in the future
- how the agency plans to select candidates from the merit list to fill future vacancies, such as based on location
- the type of merit list that will be created.

This is important because it will impact:

- what size the merit list should be
- whether there should be one or multiple merit lists (e.g. by location).

The appropriate size of a merit list will vary depending on the above factors and may change each time a role is advertised. However, being mindful of not creating a list so large that a significant number of candidates will never be offered roles helps minimise candidate frustration and disengagement.

For example, if using ranked merit lists or pools, agencies can create separate ranked lists or pools for each location. This will give the agency



maximum flexibility in using the ranked merit list or pools. This is because if only one overall ranked merit pool is used the agency will be required to select from the highest ranked pool first, regardless of the location preferences the candidates may have indicated. Please see [Factsheet: Advertising a location for a vacancy](#) for further information.

Merit list size

Managing the size of merit lists is crucial to ensuring they remain practical and efficient for agencies to use. This requires creating a merit list of an appropriate size that balances the need to avoid exhausting the list too quickly (and therefore having to undertake another recruitment exercise to fill further vacancies) with the risk of creating an unnecessarily large list of candidates. Agencies can determine the appropriate merit list size based on current needs and anticipated future vacancies, including likelihood of the list being accessed by other agencies.

Being placed on a merit list often creates an expectation among candidates that they are likely to be offered employment in the future. Creating large merit lists, where only a small proportion of candidates are likely to be offered employment from a merit list, can create unrealistic expectations. It may also impact candidate perceptions of fairness and reduce confidence in the value of APS merit lists. To support a positive candidate experience and maintain trust in APS recruitment, agencies are encouraged to keep merit lists to a manageable size. This includes the list being at a size where it is likely that most (but not necessarily all) candidates will be able to be offered employment within the period of the merit list operation (18 months from the date the vacancy is advertised). This reduces the number of candidates on merit lists who are unlikely to receive an offer, building trust in the agency's recruitment processes, and the recruitment practices of the APS more broadly.

For example, a merit list for a niche role would likely have fewer candidates on it as there will be fewer vacancies available within the agency and across the APS. Whereas a merit list for a customer service role or an Executive Assistant may be larger as there are more similar positions within the agency and likely across the APS.

How to reduce the size of a merit list

Candidates rated as suitable are not automatically required to be placed on a merit list. If the number of suitable candidates is greater than the expected number of current and future vacancies, the selection panel should consider the following factors to decide who to include.

Candidate suitability is relative:

For a process to be merit-based it must be competitive and involve a comparative assessment of candidates. Accordingly, agencies may determine an appropriate merit list size and limit inclusion to only the strongest candidates within that field of applicants.

Suitability to perform a role is different from a comparative assessment. While a candidate may demonstrate the skills, abilities and work-related qualities required to perform the role, merit requires candidates to be comparatively assessed against the other candidates that applied. This means that in a merit-based process, meeting the minimum requirements of a role does not automatically mean a candidate will be assessed as suitable or placed on a merit list. Instead, all candidates are assessed in comparison with each other to determine the strongest candidates. Agencies may also adjust the threshold for suitability based on the quality and number of candidates. In a highly competitive field, this may mean that a candidate who may be capable of performing the duties of the role is not included on the merit list because they may not be as competitive when compared against the other candidates who applied. This could also result in a



selection panel deciding to use a ranked merit pool (e.g. exceptional/highly suitable/suitable) and only placing those in the highest ranked category in the merit pool.

How to differentiate candidates:

To effectively determine a candidate's relative suitability selection panels must be able to differentiate candidates through comparative assessments.

Factors used to differentiate equally suitable candidates must be directly relevant to the advertised role requirements and within candidates' control. This may include consideration of a particular skillset valuable for the team at that point in time. To ensure transparency of decision making, agencies must justify candidate selections, including any differentiating considerations and clearly document all employment decisions in the selection report.

Case study

An agency determines it needs a merit list of up to 10 candidates to meet current and future needs. Through the selection process, the panel ranked 20 candidates as suitable. To ensure the merit list created is of a suitable size for the agency's needs, the panel re-convene to further comparatively assess the 20 candidates. The panel can group the 20 candidates into similar levels of suitability (e.g. highly suitable and suitable) or rank the candidates in order of suitability (e.g. 1 to 20). Both approaches can support the panel to identify the 10 strongest candidates for inclusion on the merit list. The selection report must record how each candidate was comparatively assessed and the factors that distinguished those placed on the merit list.

Impacts of comparative assessment and differentiating candidates:

A comparative assessment process may clearly differentiate some candidates as being more suitable than others. If this is the case, it will be necessary to create a ranked merit list or ranked merit pool. It would then be necessary to offer the role to:

- to the highest ranked candidate in the ranked merit list, or
- to a candidate from the highest ranked pool where suitable candidates still remain.

A single (unranked) pool of suitable candidates is only possible where all candidates have been assessed as being equally suitable.

High-quality candidates

The purpose of a merit list is to identify a group of high-quality candidates who may genuinely be considered for the immediate or future vacancy. To achieve this, agencies should ensure the assessment criteria and processes are appropriately targeted to assess the work-related qualities genuinely required for the role. Assessment processes should be sufficiently robust to determine whether candidates can perform the role, as well enabling candidates to be comparatively assessed against each other. This helps ensure the merit list includes only the most competitive candidates and promotes the integrity, rigour and effectiveness of the selection processes.

Panels should only include candidates who are genuinely assessed as suitable and have demonstrated a high level of capability in comparison to other candidates rather than including all candidates who may be marginally suitable or merely meet minimum requirements. In some cases, this may result in fewer candidates being placed on a merit list than originally planned.

Managing candidates' expectations

It is important to set clear expectations for candidates, including for candidates who may be less familiar with the application of merit lists.

Agencies should communicate throughout the selection process:

- that being placed on a merit list increases the potential to receive offers of employment across the APS, but it does not guarantee employment
- that merit lists will only be shared where two vacancies are assessed as being similar in accordance with section 9 of the *Australian Public Service Commissioner's Directions 2022*
- whether the agency intends sharing the merit list in the first 6 months from when the merit list is created, noting agencies that created the list generally have exclusive use during this period but may agree to share during this time if requested by another agency and similar vacancy requirements are met.

This information may be shared in a candidate information pack, during interviews or when advising candidates of the outcome of the selection process.

Further information

The APSC has developed [Recruitment factsheets, case studies and templates](#) to support recruitment in the APS. Further information on recruitment in the APS more broadly is available in the [APS Recruitment Guide](#) and [Guide on Merit](#).