

ASSESSING LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Employers often seek to hire candidates with strong language and communication skills. To accurately assess these qualifications, employers may need to gather additional information from applicants.

This resource describes three options to help employers assess language and communication skills. It also includes some key considerations and links to additional resources.

Before exploring the options, we recommend that employers examine their current practices.

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Have the specific communication skills required for each position been identified?
- Have definitions or rating scales been developed for each communication skill? If so, has this information been made available to everyone involved in the hiring process?

If you answered 'no' to any of the questions above, consider working on these foundational steps. Appendix A includes a sample skill definition and rating scale, along with a method of assessing the skill. Additional communication skill examples and definitions can be found in Indeed's article, [How to Assess Communication Skills in Candidates](#). Employers can also search for communication competencies and descriptions on Employment and Social Development Canada's [Occupational and Skills Information System \(OaSIS\)](#).

Next, employers should review their existing strategies for assessing candidates' language and communication skills. Are these practices yielding useful information? If not, it may be helpful to adapt or discontinue them.

Once you have considered your organization's current practices, here are some strategies you can explore adding to the screening process.

OPTION 1: INCLUDE A COMMUNICATION-SKILLS-RELATED QUESTION IN THE INTERVIEW

Ask candidates to answer a behavioural interview question about a situation when they used a particular communication skill. For example, “Tell me about a time when you gave a presentation. How did you ensure the content was understood by the audience?”

This strategy allows candidates to provide additional information about their communication skills in the context of their previous professional experiences. It may also provide insights into how candidates will behave in the future.

Key considerations:

- Focus-Craft the question to target a specific communication skill that is relevant to the position.
- Plain language-Use simple language and avoid metaphors so the question is clear to jobseekers from different cultural backgrounds.
- Scoring-To promote consistency across raters, create a rubric with descriptions of each possible score.

OPTION 2: ASK CANDIDATES TO COMPLETE A COMMUNICATION-RELATED TASK DURING THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

These tasks can be completed after the first interview and scored by the hiring panel. For example, if the job requires memo-writing, ask candidates to draft a one-page memo based on a prompt. Or, for positions that involve talking with customers about products, ask candidates to record themselves giving a one-minute description of a product they are familiar with.

This practice provides candidates with another opportunity to demonstrate relevant communication skills. This is helpful because how a candidate performs in an interview may not always be correlated with how well they can carry out essential job-related tasks.

Key considerations:

- Length of time to complete the task-Pick a timeframe that is feasible and ensure that all candidates have the same deadline.
- Use of AI and other technology-Decide if it is acceptable for candidates to use AI or other technological tools to assist them in completing the task. If this is a concern, try to structure the task in a way that prevents the use of these tools.
- Accommodations-As with other steps in the hiring process, ask candidates if they require accommodations to complete the assessment. Also, explain the meaning of the term ‘accommodation’ and share some examples of what is possible. This will help candidates who are not familiar with this practice.
- Scoring-To promote consistency across raters, create a rubric with descriptions of each possible score.
- Preventing bias-If there is a concern about bias in the rating process, the person receiving the written tasks can remove candidates’ names from the files and replace them with numbers. Then, the assessors can use the coded files to score the assessments.

OPTION 3: ALIGN LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS IN JOB DESCRIPTIONS WITH STANDARDIZED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS, AND REQUEST PROOF OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

This is a multi-step process that begins with analyzing the language skills needed for a particular role. This can be done using a job analysis framework, which involves asking relevant questions around language and communication-related tasks, mediums of communication, stakeholder groups, and the nature of conversations. More information on job analysis can be found in [Forbes' How To Perform A Job Analysis \(2024 Guide\)](#).

After this, the organization needs to choose a language assessment framework and determine the proficiency levels corresponding with the role-specific communication activities. Most assessment frameworks have descriptors for each competency level that can help with this mapping.

Next, the language requirements need to be validated and added to the job description. The validation process can involve reviewing the language benchmarks of existing staff to determine if they are consistent with the benchmark estimates. Employers can also check if there are external benchmarks available from relevant professional organizations or language assessment providers. Lastly, during the screening process, employers need to request and review candidates' language assessment results.

This strategy provides clear language requirements for candidates to be assessed against. It also helps reduce uncertainty about whether candidates will have the language skills to perform their roles once they are hired.

Key considerations:

- Resources-This is a complex process that requires a high level of expertise and a large time investment.
- Choice of benchmarks-There are several different English and French tests that are commonly completed by newcomers to Canada. Employers need to decide which benchmarks would best fit their context.
- Accepting alternatives-Some newcomers completed post-secondary studies internationally with English or French as the language of instruction. Instead of requiring these candidates to complete a language test, employers may choose to accept transcripts that note one of these as the language of instruction.
- Equity-This practice could disadvantage newcomers who are not eligible for free language assessment services. If that is a concern, employers can consider offering in-house language assessments or reimbursing candidates for the cost of external language assessments.
- Scope-To promote consistency, this practice should be implemented organization-wide, rather than for one or two positions. If that is not possible, employers may choose to prioritize roles which require high communication skills or are frequently hired for.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This guide provides three options to help employers gather additional information about candidates' language and communication skills. Behavioural interview questions and communication skill assessments can be targeted to roles where there is a greater need for assessing particular skills. The third alternative, aligning job requirements with language benchmarks, should be implemented organizational-wide.

Employers that want to explore the third option can consider the [Canadian Language Benchmarks](#) (CLB) and [Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens](#) (NCLC) as potential the language assessment frameworks. The CLB and NCLC are national standards used to assess the language proficiency of adult immigrants. These assessments are free for eligible newcomers, and candidates can request an assessment through the [Language Assessment and Referral Centre](#). There is also [anonline self-assessment](#) that can provide approximate benchmarks on listening and reading skills.

For more information about the language skills associated with each of the levels in these assessments, please refer to the Overview of CLB and NCLC competency levels.

For additional guidance around assessing candidates' language skills, check out Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia's [Assessing Language Proficiency](#) resource. This FAQ-style document explores a variety of issues from when it is important to assess candidates' language skills to how to get started.

Another useful resource is Hire Immigrants Ottawa's [Employer Tip Sheet-Language Proficiency: Tips for Recruiting Skilled Immigrants](#). This document contains additional information about adding a language lens to the recruitment process and ideas about how to support employees who want to improve their language skills.



APPENDIX A: DEFINING AND ASSESSING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Documenting the definitions of particular communication skills and providing that information to individuals involved in screening candidates can help create consistency in the assessment process. The following example includes the definition of a communication skill, along with a behavioural interview question and a rating scale to help assess candidates.

Skill: Giving constructive feedback

Definition: The ability to communicate observations to an employee about specific behaviours that are negatively impacting performance. The comments should be provided in a way that allows for two-way communication and helps the employee identify strategies to improve their performance.

Interview question: Tell us about a time when you provided constructive feedback to someone you supervised. How did you give the feedback and what was the result?

Ratings:

3-The candidate provided feedback that was focused on specific behaviours and performance impacts. The candidate asked the employee questions and engaged them in identifying steps to help them improve their performance.

2- The candidate provided feedback that was focused on specific behaviours and performance impacts. The candidate asked the employee questions, but did not provide opportunities for them to contribute to developing solutions.

1-The candidate provided feedback without asking the employee questions or giving them opportunities to identify solutions. The feedback was missing either specific behaviours or performance impacts.

0-The candidate was unable to describe a situation when they provided constructive feedback to an employee.