

Second, there is some concern about faking. Not only might applicants be motivated to fake their responses to biodata questions, but also many responses are impossible to verify (e.g., "Did you collect coins or stamps as a child?"). Research also suggests, though, that faking can be reduced through several strategies: (1) use items that are more objective and verifiable, (2) simply warn applicants against faking, and (3) ask applicants to elaborate upon and justify their responses. For example, if applicants are asked, "In the past year, how often have you read about new marketing strategies?" (1 = never, 5 = very often), they would recall a follow-up question to elaborate on their response: "If you answered 2, 3, 4, or 5, briefly list the strategies and the sources that you read." Although this elaboration technique has been shown to correlate with applicants' verbal ability, the correlation appears to be small enough such that the biodata questions do not become a test of cognitive ability.³⁴

Third, applicants and managers do not react positively to biodata. The inventories often comprise more than 100 items, and most research suggests that applicants do not see the questions as job related. Neither, apparently, do HR managers. A survey of 255 HR professionals revealed that, among various selection measures, biodata beat only a "personal hunch" in terms of its perceived validity. Those hunches may also spill over into how the biodata inventory is scored. In some cases, employers may use a rational scoring scheme, whereby they give more weight to items they believe correlate more strongly with job performance and less weight to items they believe correlate less strongly with job performance. In other cases, employers may use an empirical scoring scheme, whereby weighting of items is determined by estimated validities found in previous research. A purely rational scoring scheme is likely to generate the lowest validity for a biodata inventory, while a blend of rational and empirical scoring is likely to generate the highest validity.³⁵

Despite these limitations, it is important to keep in mind that biodata can have impressive validity and that its use is appropriate when it is carefully validated and when the aforementioned limitations are addressed.

Reference and Background Checks

Background information about job applicants can come not only from the applicant but also from people familiar with the applicant (e.g., employers, creditors, and neighbors). Organizations often solicit this information on their own or use the services of agencies that specialize in investigating applicants. Background information solicited from others consists of letters of recommendation, reference checks, and background checks.

Letters of Recommendation

A very common reference check in some settings (e.g., academic institutions) is to ask applicants to have letters of recommendation written for them. There are