

Supervisor's Network **NYU**

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NYU Human Resources

Reference Checking. The purpose is simple — to ensure that you hire the people best suited for your job openings (and avoid major hiring mistakes) through effective questioning of candidates' references. Reference checking is not an optional part of the hiring process, nor is it only a means to confirm what is learned in a face-to-face interview with a candidate. References help provide the complete picture of a candidate's skills, work habits, and personality. Learn successful reference checking techniques, and your efforts will be reflected in your selection of candidates.

WHY CHECK REFERENCES?

The reference check determines competency on the job. Done well, you'll get a better understanding of candidates' ability to conduct themselves appropriately as well as to do their jobs. It involves an in-depth conversation with someone who knows or has worked with a particular candidate. The discussion may touch on the following three areas to reveal a person's background.

1. **Work habits and ability.** How well does the applicant know his or her work and perform on the job? You want to
2. **Relationship building.** How well does the candidate get along with and relate to other people? Information on this issue is fairly easy to discover and discuss and can usually be obtained from anyone you speak with — both personal and professional references.
3. **Personal character.** What is the candidate's basic personality, including ethics? This level of information is important for all positions.

CONDUCTING THE REFERENCE CHECK

When you — a human resources officer or other staff member — contact references, the following basic information should be covered.

- > the purpose of the call
- > a description of the position for which the applicant applied
- > confirmation of the relationship between the person giving the reference and the applicant
- > verification of basic data such as job title, functions, salary, and dates of employment
- > job-related questions about the applicant's knowledge, skills, and abilities as they relate to the position
- > questions that are designed to bring out the reference's observations of the applicant's work behaviors
- > questions and answers documented in writing

REFERENCE CHECKING TECHNIQUES

If you are personally checking references, you may wish to use the following sample language to begin the process.

Initial Contact and Introduction. Once you have a reference on the telephone and have introduced yourself, you can establish a collegial tone by simply asking for permission to talk. Try one of these openers.

- > “Is this a convenient time to talk?”
- > “I will need about 15 minutes of your time. May I continue?”
- > “With your permission, I will ask you a few short questions.”

If the candidate has completed a release form, mention this to the reference. Once you receive permission from the reference, begin asking questions.

If the Reference Does Not Cooperate. Here are some options that may prompt the reference to talk with you.

- > “Would you like the candidate to call you and personally authorize you to speak with me?”
- > “Should I assume that your unwillingness to speak with me means that it would be a negative reference?”
- > “Does your refusal to talk about the candidate apply only to this person or to all former employees?”
- > “I must explain that unless we can talk to people who know the applicant, there may not be a job offer.”

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Sample Questions.

- > “Is the candidate eligible for rehire with your organization?”
- > “How long and in what capacity have you known the candidate?”
- > “What would the candidate’s critics say about him/her?”
- > “Describe the candidate’s management style.”
- > “Tell me about a time when the candidate successfully changed your mind.”
- > “What advice would you give his/her next employer/employees?”
- > “Describe a mistake the candidate made and how she/he corrected the situation.”
- > “Who else should I talk to about the candidate?”
- > “Is there any question that I didn’t ask you that I should have?”
- > “Is there anything we haven’t covered that you would like the search committee/hiring manager to know about?”

Remember, to gain as much information as possible, let the person speak without interrupting. If the reference pauses in the conversation, it may mean he or she has other information and is hesitant to share this information. Get your reference to talk about everything that would be helpful, but only ask for information that will be used in your hiring decision.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- > Learn as much as you can about a person before you extend a job offer.
- > Don’t hire if you’re unsure about a candidate’s past work history and accomplishments.

SEVEN MYTHS OF REFERENCE CHECKING

- 1. One in ten job candidates exaggerates or embellishes his or her work history.** Research shows this figure to be much higher—closer to about one in three candidates will embellish his or her background.
- 2. About 20 percent of high-level applicants have their résumés written for them.** Actually, 75 percent or more résumés have been written (or substantially rewritten) by someone else.
- 3. To minimize your organization’s legal risks, you shouldn’t reveal information about a present or past employee when contacted by another potential employer.** We expect information from others, so we should also offer assistance to other organizations when contacted. See *When You Are Asked to Provide a Reference*, below.
- 4. Checking references is mainly to see if a person is lying.** Checking for truthfulness is actually secondary to determining a candidate’s past job performance and overall competence level.
- 5. Candidates will only supply references who are likely to provide favorable information.** Good questioning will provide important insights about the applicant. References are also a place to start in gathering the names of other people who know the applicant.
- 6. If you don’t want to jeopardize the job of someone who is currently employed, there’s not much you can do to find out about him or her.** There are always other people with whom you can speak. Individuals who have recently left the company, clients or customers, coworkers

SEVEN MYTHS OF REFERENCE CHECKING continued

close to the candidate who know what's going on, or company retirees are all possible sources of information.

7. **Asking a candidate to clarify unclear or confusing information that surfaced during your reference check**

is legally dangerous. Clarifying confusing information is really the only fair thing to do with someone you consider a viable candidate.

WHEN YOU ARE ASKED TO PROVIDE A REFERENCE

- > Who should provide references?
 - Supervisors and managers are generally the appropriate individuals to respond to requests for references from prospective employers, since they are able to best articulate on a past employee's performance. However, if a unit head or HR officer does not think a supervisor or manager should provide this information, then he/she may provide this information.
 - Generally, other employees should be advised not to provide references to prospective employers.
- > Verify the authority of the individual requesting information by using techniques such as arranging to call the person back to verify the person is who he/she claims to be.
- > Determine whether the caller has a legitimate need to know the information requested. Ask why the information is being requested and what it will be used for.
- > Ask the prospective employer for a waiver from the former (or current) employee releasing NYU from liability for a good faith reference, or obtain a release from the former employee directly.
- > The designated person should have access to all relevant information, which should be strictly limited to the facts. Check and recheck all information available for accuracy and substantiation.
- > The designated person should review the files for a settlement or employment separation agreement to ensure that he or she is not violating the terms of the agreement by providing a reference.
- > Inform the prospective employer that any information provided should be treated as strictly confidential and used only for the purposes revealed to NYU.
- > Provide only job-related information, such as job performance. Questions about one's personality traits, personal life, or other nonjob-related items should not be answered.
- > Do not provide information "off the record."
- > Disclose all relevant and substantive information about the former employee, including the positive and the negative information. Partial disclosures could lead to legal actions.
- > All communication regarding former employees should be truthful, based on facts, and rely on the employment record. Do not rely on secondhand or thirdhand information.
- > References should be provided in a fair and consistent manner for all former employees. Do not provide references for some employees and not others. Such selective disclosure could be perceived as unfair or discriminatory.
- > Do not provide misleading information. Do not give false reasons for terminating someone's employment, such as "reorganization." Do not falsely state that someone was a good employee in order to help that person get a job elsewhere.
- > Document the information provided when communicated by telephone or in person.

NYU BEST PRACTICES

NYU is one of the largest employers in New York, allowing its hiring professionals to have learned key techniques for checking references. Here are a few methods that can help the process.

- > Have the candidate sign a release form consenting to have his or her references checked. This helps encourage prior employers to speak more candidly, and the candidate waives his or her right to legal action against employers based on what the reference-giver says.
- > To get objective feedback, ideally the person who interviewed the candidate shouldn't be the one to call for references. Have references checked by a human resources officer or another member of your organization who hasn't met the candidate.
- > Begin with employment facts first (dates of employment, title), and then move on to open-ended questions to learn more. Use the behavioral-based approach to focus on a candidate's past behaviors in specific situations. For example, you might say, "Tell me about a time when . . ."
- > Use the reference checking form, available on www.nyu.edu, to ensure you ask questions consistently of all those giving references.

ONLINE RESOURCES

For NYU reference checking release forms, visit www.nyu.edu/hr/pdf/forms/erelenew.pdf (current employers) or www.nyu.edu/hr/pdf/forms/erepast.pdf (former employers). For a list of Web sites that verify licenses for different professions, visit www.nyu.edu/hr/toolkit/licrefch.html.

Note: Sources for this issue of Supervisor's Network include the NYU Employment Office's Manager's Toolkit; *The Complete Reference Checking Handbook* by Edward C. Andler (AMACOM Div. American Mgmt. Assn.); and www.ExecSearches.com.

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THE SUPERVISOR'S BOOKSHELF

Consult these relevant books for more reference checking strategies.

**Reference Checking for Everyone:
How to Find Out Everything You Need to
Know about Anyone**

by Paul W. Barada

With a straightforward style, Paul Barada, Monster.com's reference expert covers practical information about how to effectively collect references. You'll find techniques for digging deeper during a reference check—even when confronted with vague responses. Barada includes lists of questions that can and cannot be asked legally.

THE MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES, 2004

**Legal, Effective References:
How to Give and Get Them**

by Wendy Bliss

The goal of this book is to offer a practical plan for employers to gain meaningful references. With tips on obtaining and evaluating information received over the telephone, the book also includes lists of states with reference immunity laws and a brief description of necessary legal terms.

SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, 2002

**High Impact Hiring:
How to Interview and Select Outstanding Employees**

by Del J. Still

Focusing on the broader topic of interviewing techniques, this volume tells you how to uncover a job candidate's work habits before making a hiring decision. Author Del J. Still provides 175 sample questions to ask during an interview as well as a reference check.

MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING, 2ND ED.,
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