

REFERENCE CHECKING GUIDELINES

Why Check References?

Reference checking provides selection committees with information about the applicant's past job performance and knowledge, skills, abilities, and other job-related characteristics. Good reference checking is a difficult task, but a worthwhile one. And it is important to note that you cannot treat letters of reference as substitutes for a reference check. Much of the value in reference checking comes in the form of the unexpected. Typically, references convey important information in what they don't say about a candidate (as opposed to what they do say), in how they say it (where emphasis is placed), and by pointing out what you know to be undesirable (e.g., telling you something they believe to be a strength that would instead be a weakness in your particular position). In the reference checking process, silence from a reference is usually a negative sign. People don't hesitate to speak highly of others thought to be good performers or highly capable individuals. Most references, therefore, would rather say little or nothing than provide statements, which do not support a candidate's abilities.

When to Check References?

It is most useful if reference checks are made prior to extending invitations for campus interviews and prior to making a job offer. It is generally advisable to seek permission from the candidate to check his/her listed references prior to a campus visit invitation. For record-keeping purposes, permission received in writing (i.e., via e-mail or fax) is preferable to verbal agreement. If it is not feasible to obtain written permission, note the date and time of the conversation where permission was obtained from the candidate in the selection documents. After a candidate has come on campus for an interview, the application becomes "public information," thus the selection committee can contact any listed or unlisted references who can speak about the candidate's past performance.

What to Ask?

As with other aspects of the selection process, the reference check cannot solicit illegal, irrelevant, or unnecessary information. Always identify yourself, your department, and the institution. State the purpose of the call, and identify the candidate and the position to which he or she has applied. It often helps to state that you have obtained permission from the candidate to speak with his/her references.

Questions asked of references should be targeted at soliciting information regarding how a candidate performed past jobs (or was prepared to perform the position being sought).

The following are offered as examples of permissible and useful question one can ask during a reference check.

1. In what capacity and for how long have you known the applicant?
2. Given your knowledge of the candidate, what in particular makes him/her a good candidate for this position?
3. What, in your opinion, are the candidate's greatest professional strengths? Could you provide an example of a time when he/she displayed this strength?
4. What, in your opinion, is the candidate's weakest professional area? To your knowledge, is he/she making attempts to overcome this weakness?
5. Are there any other comments you would like to add about this candidate or his/her abilities?

It is also good to ask questions specific to the requirements of the particular position being filled. For example, there may be a need to ask questions about a candidate's managerial style, ability to collaborate with others, experience with working with diverse groups of people, knowledge of a discipline-specific content area, and so forth. As long as the questions are related to the candidate's potential to perform the job, they are legal and useful in the selection process.