

## Checking References

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### **Why is it important to check references?**

- Important part of the selection process
- Help insure successful hires
- Screen for a 'good fit' for the organization/department
- Avoid probation failures
- Can avoid charges of 'negligent hiring'

Obtaining multiple references (at least two) allows the committee or supervisor to look for consistency among comments and to demonstrate that reasonable care was used in the hiring process. Information provided by references through telephone calls is likely to prove very useful in evaluating candidate's skills, training, and experience and his/her ability to perform the duties of the position being filled.

Telephone references are usually more effective than letters of reference because specific areas can be covered and follow-up questions can be asked.

Specific job-related questions should be developed for the telephone reference check. You may not ask questions of a reference that you are not permitted to ask of the candidate during the interview. The person checking references may request general personal and work references not relating to race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, or age. All questions asked and issues raised must be job-related and similar for all candidates. Avoid questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no". A good question to ask the reference at the end of the discussion is, "Would you rehire the applicant if given the opportunity? Why or why not?"

Notes should be taken during the reference check and returned with the Staff Hiring Activity Record.

A previous employer may have rules regarding supplying references and may provide only the position title, dates of employment, salary, and eligibility for rehire. If is the case, document this on the form. Organizations that may be hesitant to give references may be willing to verify information if it is provided to them. In this situation, try phrasing your questions so they simply request verification of what you've already been told. For example, you may say "The applicant says she had excellent attendance while working for you. Can you verify that?"

### **Who should conduct reference checks?**

The supervisor of the position being filled should be the person who contacts the candidate's references. When that person calls another supervisor, there is likely to be a natural camaraderie that will make references easier to get and generally more candid. A person giving a reference is more likely to tell straightforward and truthful information about a candidate to a person whom they feel is their counterpart in another organization. Most importantly, the person who directly supervises the position being filled will have a better understanding of how to evaluate the answers to questions. This kind of first hand information can be invaluable in making a hiring decision.

### **Who should be contacted as a reference?**

It is often best to contact those people who have supervised the applicant or have received or somehow reviewed the results of work performed by the applicant. Hopefully you'll have at least two first-line supervisors for every applicant for whom you're checking references. The rest can be people who have seen, received or reviewed work of the candidate or those who have been on a project or on-going team with the applicant. Each time you talk to a reference, makes sure you find out what their relationship was with the candidate. For those who are fresh out of college, use supervisors for whom they worked part time or contact professors and teachers. When questioning this kind of reference, find out what they think of the person's ability to learn and their follow-through regarding reports and homework.

### **How to conduct a reference check**

- Be thoroughly familiar with the candidate's file before you conduct a reference check. Review any notes you have made from the application, cover letter, resume, and interview process.
- Take the time to tell the person you've contacted why you're doing so and explain the duties and responsibilities of the position for which the applicant has applied.
- Have a written plan for the questions you're going to ask and write down as many notes as you can.
- Don't let opinions of others substitute for facts and examples.
- Don't evaluate information while gathering it. Your goal is to collect relevant information. You can assess everything when you're done.
- Be alert to unusual hesitations, ambiguous or evasive responses, overly negative or vindictive responses, or overly enthusiastic responses.
- Conduct in compliance with all federal and state laws and regulations. The American with Disabilities Act prohibits asking non-job-related information from previous employers or other sources. Avoid questions regarding marital status, religion, age, race, health-related issues, child care, transportation, worker compensation claims, and any other non-job related questions.
- Make sure reference check is tailored to the position.
- Check as many employment and personal references as possible.
- Verify academic degrees, professional certifications or licenses, etc.
- Be consistent – ask the same questions of each reference.
- Always ask if the employee would be rehired by the organization/company.

If an applicant indicates that a current supervisor should not be contacted, ask about contacting the current supervisor contingent on a job offer. If the applicant still declines, they should be told that the lack of the current supervisor's reference may affect the hiring decision.

If an applicant informs you that their current supervisor does not know they are looking for another job and have interviewed with your department, you may choose to inform the applicant that you will allow them a day or so to speak with their supervisor/employer so that the immediate supervisor can be contacted as a reference. If they are not comfortable with you speaking with their direct supervisor, you may speak with a previous supervisor or other work-related references.

Reference checks may be completed by phone, in person, by mail, internet or fax. A personal phone call is usually best. The most useful references normally come from former supervisors; however other good sources can include coworkers, clients, HR departments, executives, and listed references.

Review the duties of the position and review the application materials. Make a list of facts or qualifications to verify and a list of questions to ask. Areas of possible inquiry could include:

- Sociability – How well does the applicant get along with and relate to others?
- Work habits and ability – How well does the applicant know the work and perform on the job?  
Assess technical/functional ability and attitude on the job.
- Personal character- Is the person trustworthy, honest, and dependable?

When checking references, make sure you make note of the name and title of the person supplying the reference information for each reference check you conduct.

When conducting reference checks, be friendly. Introduce yourself. Indicate you have written consent for the reference check or that the applicant listed that person as a reference. Give a basic description of the job. Start with fundamental verification questions and then transition into more specific performance-based questions. Ask follow up or clarification questions if something isn't clear. Listen to the responses – is there hesitation or vagueness? Remember that the person on the other end of the phone may be thinking about the question and the best way to answer it. At the end of the conversation, ask the reference if they can think of or recommend anyone else with whom you should speak. If information is not forthcoming, you might ask questions such as “How would you rate this employee on a scale of 1 to 5?” on one or more subject areas.

### **Evaluating the information you collect**

Compare information from different sources to see how they match up. If you receive a negative reference, always check this information against another reference statement. If needed, call again and verify people's responses.

Remember that it's your responsibility, not the former employer's, to evaluate the information relevant to qualifications. You may have a different definition or criteria for evaluation. What may be undesirable from the former employer's standpoint may be just what you're looking for. Do not use their rating as your own. Never allow the individual to give you “confidential” or “off the record” information.

Giving good references is easy. Supervisors or administrators may avoid calling back those who seek references for employees for whom they will not provide a good recommendation. If you are not able to obtain the references you seek, try checking with other employers of the candidate.

If you receive negative information from a reference, evaluate it with caution and check the information against other reference statements. Occasionally you will encounter a reference who is so upset with an employee who wants to leave an organization that they may say anything to damage an employee's ability to seek other employment. You may also encounter someone with whom the candidate had a personality conflict. You may also receive references from persons who are personal friends of the applicant and are biased in the applicant's favor. If you use the reference check information as a basis for eliminating a candidate from consideration, this must be documented and turned in with the Staff Hiring Activity Record.

Weigh information in the same manner for all applicants. What disqualifies one should be the basis for disqualifying any other.

All reference checks should be returned with the Staff Hiring Activity Record.

### **Legal Pitfalls of Reference Checking**

NEVER conduct a reference check without a signed release that limits your liabilities. You could find yourself and the institution being sued for invading the privacy of others or for damages in the case where a would-be employee loses the job or fails to receive a promotion because of your reference checking.

Many employers will only give you information regarding position title and dates of employment. If you have a signed release, be sure to convey that information to the person to whom you're speaking.

Be careful that you don't ask any questions that you would not ask of a candidate. (What You Can and Can't Ask <http://www.admin.mtu.edu/hro/forms/whatyoucanandcantasklongversion8-12-04.pdf>)

### **Recordkeeping**

All information obtained from reference and any other background checks should be used only as part of the employment process and kept strictly confidential. Information gathered should be sent to Human Resources as part of the hiring process. Be sure to document the position applied for, applicant's name, reference name and phone number, and date of the contact.

## **Reference Check Questions**

### *General information*

- How long and in what capacity did you know this individual?
- What was this person's title and responsibilities at the time you worked together and the reference's current title, if different?
- What were the beginning and ending employment dates for this individual?
- What was this individual's beginning and ending salary?
- What position(s) did the individual hold and what were the duties?
- What were the individual's most important job duties?
- Did this individual receive any promotions or demotions? Please describe.
- Why did this individual leave your company?
- Do you know why he/she is leaving his/her current employment?
- Would you recommend that your company rehire this individual? Why or why not?
- What was it like to work in your organization? Please describe the culture and any unique dynamics that were present.
- Were there any instances of inappropriate behavior or violence?

### *Job related questions to ask of a supervisor/manager*

- I'd like to go over the candidate's current resume concerning the job he/she had with you. Is this correct?
- What were the individual's most recent job duties or responsibilities? How well did they carry them out?
- In your opinion, what are the individual's strengths? Please give examples.
- In what area(s) might this individual need to develop? Please give examples.
- Do you think this individual would perform well as a [job title]?
- What kind of job is best suited for this individual's abilities?

### *Performance levels*

- How did this individual's performance compare to other employees with similar job duties?
- Was this individual a team player?
- Was this individual a motivated self-starter?
- Can the applicant manage a heavy workload? Describe a typical workload for this individual.
- How would you describe this individual's overall performance and quality of work?
- How has this individual changed the position from any predecessors?
- How has this person grown in their skills and abilities over the years?
- How would you describe his/her performance compared to others with similar responsibilities?
- Did this person's conduct ever require disciplinary measures? If so, describe.

### *Major skill areas*

- How fast and/or accurate is the applicant's work?
- Does the employee keep his/her supervisor informed?
- Describe this individual's relationship with (choose from students, faculty, other staff, customers/clients and/or suppliers, community, administrators, etc).
- Describe the quality of this individual's written and verbal communication skills.
- Describe the type(s) of decisions this individual was responsible for.
- Please describe any major accomplishments of this individual.
- How would you define this individual's technical skills?
- Please describe this candidate's organizational skills.
- Describe this individual's customer service skills.
- How much supervision did this individual require?
- Describe this individual's ability to organize and track details.
- Please give an example of when this individual asked you for some information. How well did they pinpoint what was needed?
- How resourceful is the candidate? Did he or she rely on you (or someone else would be considered to be a subject matter expert) to find out about everything they needed to know or did they demonstrate initiative in finding relevant information themselves?

- Has s/he ever successfully changed your mind?
- When an urgent assignment is needed, how did this individual approach this kind of situation? Can you please describe an example?
- How do you rate this individual's ability to plan short-term? Long-term?
- Please provide examples in which this individual had to make sound and timely decisions. What were the results?
- Did this plan and/or administer a budget? If so, what was the size of the budget and how did this person manage it?

*Personal traits and abilities affecting the job*

- Describe how this individual got along with management. With peers and/or coworkers.
- Describe how this individual responds to criticism. Please give an example.
- On the average, how many times a month is the candidate absent from work? (Can also ask about tardiness and leaving early)
- How did this individual demonstrate honesty and integrity?
- How does s/he handle new challenges of any sort?
- How would you describe the candidate's values and ethics?
- What have been the candidate's greatest contributions to the organization?
- Do you personally like the candidate?
- What has s/he learned from you?
- What would his/her critics say about this individual?
- Did any personal problems affect this individual's work performance?
- Did the candidate demonstrate flexibility when appropriate?
- What kinds of people did this person have trouble with? In what situations did you observe this?
- How well did this person manage crises, pressure, and/or stress?

*Job related questions to ask of a coworker*

- How did this individual get along with management? Other coworkers?
- How would you describe this individual's overall performance?
- What kind of job is best suited to this individual's abilities?
- What do/did you count on this individual for?
- How would you describe this individual's leadership, management, or supervisory skills?
- What types of people work well with this individual? What types of people do not?
- What is his/her willingness to go to bat for others?
- Describe the most controversial issue in which you have seen the candidate?
- What are his or her hobbies and/or interests?

*Supervisory skill questions*

- How many people did this person supervise? What were their titles and duties?
- Did the candidate do the following (clarify as to whether they had the authority and had actual experience in each of these areas)
  - \* hiring
  - \* establishing job duties
  - \* recommending pay increases
  - \* evaluating performance
  - \* disciplining employees
  - \* firing
  - \* supervising/managing in a union environment
- Describe the candidate's supervisory/management/leadership style. (Ask for clarification if necessary and evaluate if it was effective.)
- How would you describe this individual's leadership skills?
- How would you describe this individual's managerial or supervisory skills?
- How would you rate the individual's ability to plan short-term? Long-term?
- Describe this individual's part in the department's budget process.
- Has this individual ever fired anyone? How was that handled?
- Describe a situation in which the candidate had to use political skills.

- How well did the individual manage crisis, pressure or stress?
- Give an example of the individual's creativity.
- How would you describe his/her success in training and developing others?

#### *Wrap-up questions*

- Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?
- Given the position as I've described it, would you hire this individual for the position?
- What type of advice would you give his or her next employer to ensure success?
- Do you know of anyone else in your organization that would be qualified and/or willing to comment about this individual?

#### ***Illegal or Unethical Questions to Avoid*** (see also "What You Can and Can't Ask")

- Does the applicant have any disabilities or health problems?
- Is the applicant married or have children?
- Has the applicant made child care arrangements?
- Is the candidate married?
- Would you describe the candidate's home life as stable?

#### **Sources**

Job Reference Questions. <http://jobsearchtech.about.com/library/weekly/aa031300-4.htm>

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[http://www.resumagic.com/referencechecks\\_questionsweask.html](http://www.resumagic.com/referencechecks_questionsweask.html)

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Central Michigan University – Reference Check Questions. <http://www.hrs.cmich.edu/download-files/es-reference-check-questions.pdf>

Reference Check Problems and Solutions.

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Purdue University Reference Check Questions.

[https://www2.itap.purdue.edu/bs/HR/Reference\\_Check\\_Questions.pdf](https://www2.itap.purdue.edu/bs/HR/Reference_Check_Questions.pdf)

Kansas State University Suggested Reference Check Questions.

[http://www.ksu.edu/hr/employment/reference\\_check\\_questions\\_.pdf](http://www.ksu.edu/hr/employment/reference_check_questions_.pdf)

Hiring a Track Record: More Informative Reference Checks by Laura Gassner Otting.

[http://www.execsearches.com/articles/reference\\_checks.htm](http://www.execsearches.com/articles/reference_checks.htm)

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Western Washington University – Sample Telephone Reference Check Guide.

<http://www.wwu.edu/depts/eoc/Search%20Chair%20&%20Coordinator%20Packet/TelephoneReferenceChecks.pdf>

The University of Texas at Arlington – Reference Checks.

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Checking References – Hard to Get, But Worth It. <http://www.hrzone.com/topics/reference.html>

North Dakota State University – Reference Checking Guidelines.

[http://www.ndsu.edu/equal\\_opportunity/resources/reference4c.pdf](http://www.ndsu.edu/equal_opportunity/resources/reference4c.pdf)

University of Idaho – Reference Checking Guidelines.

<http://www.hr.uidaho.edu/documents/referencechecking.pdf&pid=69755&doc=1>

## Sample Reference Checking Form

(Verify that the applicant has provided permission before conducting reference checks)

Candidate Name \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Name/Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Company Name \_\_\_\_\_

Dates of Employment From \_\_\_\_\_ To: \_\_\_\_\_

Position(s) Held \_\_\_\_\_

Salary History \_\_\_\_\_

Reason for Leaving \_\_\_\_\_

Explain the reason for your call – say that the applicant is a finalist for the position of \_\_\_\_\_. **Do not say that the applicant has been selected.** Verify the above information with the reference. Explain the position for which the person is a candidate.

### Sample Questions

1. Please describe the duties of the candidate in their most recent position with your organization.
2. Please describe their attendance record and punctuality.
3. How would you describe the applicant's relationships with coworkers, subordinates (if applicable) and with supervisors? Also, if they had contact with outside customers, please describe that relationship.
4. Describe the candidate's work attitude (positive or negative). Please provide examples.
5. How would you describe the quantity and quality of output generated by the employee?
6. Please describe his/her strengths on the job.
7. Please describe his/her areas where you saw need for improvement.
8. What is your overall assessment of the candidate?
9. Would you recommend her/him for this position? Why or why not?
10. What was the reason they left your company/organization?
11. Would this individual be eligible for rehire by your company? Why or why not?
12. Other comments

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Reference Checking Form #2

(Verify that the applicant has provided permission before conducting reference checks)

Candidate Name \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Name/Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Company Name \_\_\_\_\_

Dates of Employment From \_\_\_\_\_ To: \_\_\_\_\_

Position(s) Held \_\_\_\_\_

Salary History \_\_\_\_\_

Reason for Leaving \_\_\_\_\_

Explain the reason for your call – say that the applicant is a finalist for the position of \_\_\_\_\_. **Do not say that the applicant has been selected.** Verify the above information with the reference. . Explain the position for which the person is a candidate.

### Sample Questions

1. Please describe the duties of the candidate in their most recent position with your organization.
2. How well do you know the applicant? Did you ever work with him/her? If yes, for how long?
3. If you had a working relationship with \_\_\_\_\_, please describe your interactions.
4. Describe the candidate's work attitude (positive or negative). Please provide examples.
5. How would you describe the quantity and quality of output generated by the employee?
6. Please describe his/her strengths on the job.
7. Please describe his/her areas or skill sets where you saw need for improvement.
8. Did he/she follow safety procedures (if appropriate)?
9. How well did he/she work with students (if appropriate)?
10. How well did he/she work with faculty (if appropriate)?
11. How well did he/she work with supervisors?
12. How well did he/she get along with customers who were not employees of your institution?
13. Please describe this individual's ability to take on responsibilities that were not part of his/her normal job duties.
14. Describe this individual's ability to take direction, follow instructions, and constructive criticism.
15. Please describe the degree of supervision this person required.
16. Does he/she work well independently? As a member of a team?

17. Did he/she supervise others?  Yes  No If yes, please describe if it was functional (only assigned duties) or administrative (responsible for hiring, firing, discipline, etc.). Please describe the style of management used by the candidate.
18. Describe leadership skills displayed by the candidate. Please explain.
19. What was his/her attendance, punctuality, and dependability like?
20. Did he/she have any problems with his/her supervisor or any subordinates? If yes, please explain.
21. What were his/her performance evaluations like?
22. How did he/she compare to others in similar positions?
23. What are his/her technical skills and knowledge of (type of work or area of employment)?
24. Describe this individual's ability to learn new things, including computer software.
25. Describe this individual's ability to juggle multiple projects and bring them to completion (if applicable).
26. Evaluate the following:
  - Timeliness:
  - Organizational skills:
  - Time management skills:
  - Writing skills:
  - Communication skills:
  - Initiative:
27. Any other comments on this individual's performance.
28. How would rate his/her character (honesty, integrity, work ethic, and attitude)?
29. Do you know how this individual handles/deals with change?
30. How well do you think the applicant would fit into our position?
31. What is your overall assessment of the candidate?
32. Would you recommend her/him for this position? Why or why not?
33. What was the reason this individual is considering leaving or left your company/organization?
34. Would this individual be eligible for rehire by your company? Why or why not?
35. Other comments

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_