

REFERENCE

CHECKING guide

HR Center

International Personnel Management Association
*for HR Professionals and Line
Managers. Copyright ©2000*

International Personnel Management Association

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HR Professionals and Line Managers*

Reliable Sources

In your reference-checking, contact individuals who have had the best opportunity to observe the candidate in the types of duties and responsibilities the applicant would face on-the-job. Ask for references covering a five- to seven-year period. References from over 10 years ago will be hard-pressed to remember valuable job-related information. If you ask the candidate to come for an interview, ask him or her to provide the name, title, organization and current telephone number of references. Following are some possible targets for references.

Supervisors - typically the best people to contact for a reference. Top executives generally provide the most useful references.

Personal references - try to avoid these references (e.g. ...relatives, clergy and teachers). They are less reliable for providing job-related information.

Representatives from organizations where the candidate has volunteered;;

Co-- Clients alternative references for different perspectives about the candidate;;

Subordinates

Neighbors - sometimes used as references for police candidates;;

Human resource departments - to confirm the candidate's positions, dates, job classification and salary.

Don't rely on only one source; instead check all references provided to ensure a more comprehensive investigation.

Preparing the information

Ask the applicants to sign a release to obtain job--information from former employers.

Review the candidate's resume and//application.

Based on a resume review and follow--from the candidate interview, prepare a list of the facts and qualifications you want verified - including relationship of the reference contact to the candidate and the length of time they worked together, responsibilities and reporting relationships, if applicable.

Review the job qualifications and prepare questions relevant to the position. All your questions should be **job relevant**. For instance, if the position for which you are hiring does not have any supervisory responsibilities, you do not need to ask the references about supervisory skills.

Do not delay. Begin checking all references as soon as the candidate gives you the permission to do so. The longer you procrastinate, the greater the risk of losing the candidate. Document the scope and depth of your background investigations and note reference requests even if they produced no information. Keep the reference information in a confidential, separate file. After six months,

discard the information if the candidate is not hired. Maintaining records on those hired will help protect an employer against negligent hiring claims.

For HR Professionals and Line Managers

Methods of Verification

Employers may check references in a variety of ways:

in person - best method, but most time--and expensive. If possible, interview in person for top level open positions. by mail, internet or fax - some employers may hesitate to write negative comments on paper.

When talking to someone, you're more likely to judge sincerity and ask follow-up questions.

telephone references. One of the most popular, effective and practical methods to acquire references is by telephone. This is a way to obtain reference information immediately and provides the checker with more time to probe and obtain detailed information. To encourage candid responses from the reference, adopt a friendly, professional tone. Following is a potential script for the phone call:

"My name is Samantha Smith, a recruiting officer with the City of America. I am calling to verify employment information for Joan Jones, a former employee. I'd like to ask you a few questions and wondered if now was a convenient time. Do you have ten minutes (or however long the interview will take)to answer some questions?"

If the reference contact does not have time to answer your questions, ask whether it would be more convenient to receive a faxed or mailed form to complete. If the individual opts to answer the questions over the phone, ask when is a convenient time for you to call back.

Tips for effective reference- checking interviews

Explain to the reference your intent and how long the questions will take.

If the candidate has signed a release, you can inform the reference and possibly encourage more answers from the reference.

Describe the position and the functions of the open job to the reference, then make sure the questions are all job related.

Follow the questions you prepared to avoid getting side--and to ensure consistency and reliability. Ask open-ended questions - rather than yes/no questions - to collect more information on the candidate. Use the following reference form - which includes follow-up questions to yes/no inquiries - to keep your questions focused.

Use follow--questions for clarity and thoroughness.

In your interviews with reference contacts, strive to obtain job--related facts and relevant information based on past behavior and experiences, rather than opinions. Ask for examples of specific incidents.

Stay on the alert for any signs of evasiveness, unusual pauses or even overly enthusiastic responses. Know what laws protect candidates against discrimination. The American with Disabilities Act (ADA), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and other laws suggest certain questions you should avoid when reference checking - including some questions concerning age, race, sex, religion or national origin. Typically, these are not job-related questions, so avoid them as appropriate. (Consult IPMA's Interview Guide for more on this topic and alternative questions to ask.).

Depending on the position's job requirements, you will have different questions for the reference contact. The first five questions below are typically the minimum asked and allow you to verify facts provided by the candidate.

Reference Checking Questionnaire

Completed by the reference checker before placing the call:

Candidate's Name Position being considered for Date

Reference (person contacted) Title Organization Telephone Number

Questions to ask the reference contact:

1. Please verify the dates of employment: from _____ to _____.
2. What type of work did he/she do? What was his/her title

_____.

Did he/she hold other positions? What were the other titles? _____.

3. What were his/her reasons for leaving the job? _____

4. What was his/her salary? \$ _____ Did this include bonus? Yes No
Overtime? Yes No Incentives? Yes No

5. Would you rehire him/her? Yes No

6. Would you please provide a copy of the candidate's performance appraisal information to us?

(If you have gotten an authorization form from candidate.)

7. Who else should I talk to about the candidate's work record? _____

8. Has disciplinary action ever been taken against the candidate? Yes No Please explain.

9. Did the candidate abide by the attendance policy at your organization? Yes No
Please
explain. _____
_____.

Reference Checking Questionnaire

If you do not wish to ask references specific questions covering critical competencies (see below), ask references to rate the following factors. Please rate the candidate on the following skills/characteristics from one to five where 1 = poor and 5 = superior:

_____ Communication skills _____ Initiative
_____ Dependability _____ Leadership
_____ Desire to learn _____ Quantity of work
_____ Quality of work _____ Attendance
_____ Integrity _____ Desire to progress

Pick and choose from the following sample questions:

The following survey is too long for the average reference contact to complete.

Select only questions that are applicable to the specific job requirements of the open position. Choose specific areas that created concern or needed clarification during the interview process and follow-up with questions to the reference contacts.

For the following questions, please circle the appropriate rating for the candidate using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest rating.

Interpersonal Questions

Please rate the candidate's ability to get along with co-workers or peers.

Highest Lowest

1 2 3 4 5

Describe the candidate's general reputation among co-workers and supervisors.

In confrontational situations, describe how the candidate reacts. Please provide specific examples.

_____.

Flexibility

Please rate the candidate's ability to adapt to changing work priorities with very little notice.

Highest Lowest

1 2 3 4 5

How does this compare to other employees doing the same or similar work?

Comments:

Please rate candidate's ability to adapt to new or changing working conditions.

Highest Lowest

1 2 3 4 5

Comments:

Initiative

Does the candidate require the supervisor to assign tasks regularly or does the candidate seek work on his/her own? Explain.

Does the candidate initiate new ideas, responsibilities or projects? Yes No

Please provide examples.

Comments:

Integrity

Does the candidate handle private data or classified work? Yes No

Can the candidate be trusted with confidential information? Yes No

Comments:

Judgment

Please rate the candidate's ability to make decisions on-the-job.

Highest Lowest

1 2 3 4 5

Describe a situation when the candidate had to make an urgent spur-of-the-moment decision.

Describe a difficult decision the candidate had to make while working for you. What was the outcome?

How does the candidate react under stress or when many responsibilities are demanding his/her time?

Productivity

Can the candidate prioritize effectively without direction? Yes No

Explain: _____

Does the candidate meet required deadlines? Yes No If no, please explain any problems with deadlines.

Explain: _____

How does the candidate's productivity compare to others in the job?

Highest Lowest

1 2 3 4 5

Supervisory skills

How many employees does the candidate directly supervise? indirectly supervise? _____

Describe how the candidate assign tasks/responsibilities.

Please rate the employees supervisory skills.
Highest Lowest
1 2 3 4 5

Leadership

Is the candidate able to handle making unpopular decisions? Yes No

Comments: _____

Can you remember a time when the candidate was able to motivate someone to complete a disagreeable task?

Give an example of how the candidate maximized human resources to achieve organizational objectives.

Describe a leadership challenge that the candidate faced and how they met the challenge.

Customer Service

Please rate the candidate's ability to deal with difficult customers.

Highest Lowest

1 2 3 4 5

What unique approaches does the candidate use to meet the needs of the client?
Please provide examples.

Describe a situation when the candidate went "beyond the call of duty" for a customer.

Team Player

Has the candidate worked on a team(s)? Yes No
Please rate the candidate's ability to work as part of a team.

Highest Lowest
1 2 3 4 5

Is the candidate generally willing to consider the opinions and proposals of others? Yes No

Explain: _____

Describe a situation when the candidate contributed to the effectiveness of a project while participating as part of a group or team.

Attention to detail

Please rate the candidate's attention to detail (e.g. when documenting information or completing forms).

Highest Lowest
1 2 3 4 5

How does the candidate ensure that his work is reviewed for accuracy and completeness?

Describe a situation when the candidate identified an error while reviewing the work of others.

Communication

Has the candidate given presentations? Yes No

To employees? Yes No

To groups outside your organization? Yes No

Do you have written summaries of evaluations for these presentations? Yes No

If yes, please forward the summaries to me.
Please rate the candidate's performance in giving a formal presentation to a group.

Highest Lowest
1 2 3 4

What does the candidate write on-the-job?

Press releases
Business plans
Newsletter articles
Journal articles
Reports
Other

Please rate the candidate's writing skills.

Highest Lowest
1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

General

What are the candidate's strengths? _____

—

Where does the candidate need to improve?

Utilizing the information

1. Do not accept all the information at face value. Personality conflicts and different work cultures may inappropriately influence responses.
2. It is best to use the information taken from a combination of different methods to make an overall assessment, e.g. written tests, interviews and reference checks.

Reference checking HR Center

International Personnel Management Association

For HR Professionals

Reference Checking Issues for the HR Professional

Reference checking is a valuable human resources tool for collecting information about an individual's past performance related to the qualifications you are seeking. The most effective means of predicting an applicant's future performance, is how they performed in the past. Reference checks may be used to verify reliability or to assess the individual's qualifications – including skills, competencies, or experience. Remember reference checking is only **one** tool in the recruitment process and all reference checking questions should be **job-related**. Use background investigations, candidate interviews, tests and other instruments as appropriate for the open position. Check references only for candidates who "pass" the interview and/or test portion of your recruitment process; conducting reference checks for all candidates is unnecessary.

Many employers fear defamation suits and therefore avoid providing any references about former employees. More often than not, the rule seems to be "Even if you have something nice to say, don't say anything at all." But an employer can be liable if they fail to check references adequately. Even though former employees may sue for defamation if an employer does share information, *future employers may sue* former employers for neglecting to provide important relevant information on behavior, including sexual harassment problems and/or serious violent behaviors. Telling the truth is normally a logical defense. One way to encourage references to be more frank is to have applicants sign a release form authorizing their former employer(s) to provide employment-related information. In addition, some state legislatures have recognized the difficulty faced by employers collecting reference information. The following states have job reference immunity laws protecting employers from civil liability for providing job references:

For the HR Professional

Most of these laws are similar and protect employers who make good-faith, job-related statements about former employees; however, there are some important differences and employers should read the full text of the law before giving job

references. Consult legal counsel for details on your state's laws. Federal laws and regulations, including the Fair Credit Reporting Act, American with Disabilities Act (ADA), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and the Uniform Guidelines on employee Selection Procedures, affect how you use information collected on job candidates. The same laws you apply in interviewing - including avoiding questions on marital status, religion, age, race or health-related issues - are also off limits in reference checking interviews. Review IPMA's Interview Guide for more information and visit IPMA's Web site at <http://www.ipma-hr.org>. Under the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), if you use an outside background investigation company for your references, you must share negative information with the applicant if it adversely affects your hiring decision. Under certain circumstances, an employer will be required to disclose the information compiled by the reporting agency. For more information, contact IPMA's HR Center or link to: <http://www.ipma-hr.org/govtaffairs/fcraref.html>.

Consistency is frequently a concern in reference checking. To increase the continuity and comparability of information collected, ask references to rate potential candidates using standard scales. This will enable you to compare more effectively your candidates' behaviors in such areas as punctuality, attendance, quality of work and cooperativeness. You should also decide whether your reference checking process will be decentralized, centralized and/or outsourced. Consistency is best achieved if reference checking is centralized through the human resources department; line managers, however, often make the final hiring decision and they may need to be involved in reference-checking, especially if they will be directly supervising the candidate.

Everyone involved in the reference-checking process needs standard tools to ensure congruity and effectiveness. The following guide and forms provide a standard resource and form for your reference-checking needs.

Policies & Waivers

Employers often include the reference-checking policy and purpose in their employee handbook or administrative manual. For example:

"It shall be the policy of the [organization] to: a) obtain as much job-related information as possible from the current or former employees of potential hires before a formal employment offer is extended; b) release as little information as possible to other employers seeking reference information from us, unless the current or former employee authorizes the release of a fuller disclosure in writing."

Candidates should also sign a waiver granting permission for former employers to release job-related information about them.

Consent and Authorization

READ CAREFULLY AND COMPLETELY BEFORE SIGNING

I have applied for employment with the (entity) and stated I was/am employed by you. My signature below authorizes you to release the contents of my employment record with your organization, whether negative or positive information.

I further consent to allow the (entity) to obtain any and all information concerning my former/current employment with you or your organization. This includes my job performance appraisals/evaluations, wage history, disciplinary action(s) if any, and all other matters pertaining to my employment with you or your organization required in connection with my application for employment with the (entity). This form may be photocopied or reproduced as a facsimile, and these copies will be as effective a release or consent as the original which I sign.

Signature of applicant Date

Witness Date. *To order more copies of this 2-part guide, please contact the IPMA publications department at e-mail: publications@ipma-hr.org, fax your order to 703-684-0948, or call 703-549-7100* Reference Guide packages are available either individually or in reduced price bulk packs. See shipping charges below

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