



Checking

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QUESTIONS

A few thoughtful questions can yield valuable information from a candidate's references.

By **CHERI ZIEGLER**, The Liberty Group

Up

You are a hiring authority and an offer of employment is sitting on your desk, ready to be extended to a candidate “pending reference check.” You might also be on the other side of the desk as a candidate, knowing that your career is at stake depending on what the reference might say about you. This article is intended to address both sides of that reference fence. The importance of references should not be underestimated.

While it can be a tedious task, it is critical. Unfortunately, due to legalities and company policy, an employer may refuse to offer any information other than beginning and ending dates, salary information and possibly job title. Ideally, a candidate should provide several references, each of whom would attest to the candidate's job performance from various perspectives. A current or previous supervisor, a peer and someone who reported to the candidate would be ideal. If the individual giving the reference worked directly with that candidate at a previous employer, he or she would be more apt to be of assistance and in a position to be candid with his or her opinion.

THE CANDIDATE'S PERSPECTIVE

If you are the candidate, you cannot control what kind of reference will be given. Still, there are certain steps you can take to make the process as effective as possible. First and foremost, give your reference contact a heads-up that he or she may be receiving a call to discuss your background. When a former employer is caught off guard, it can quickly turn into a negative.

If possible, confirm the information you have regarding your history with the company and verify that it is the same as what will be told on your behalf (dates of employment, progression of job titles, etc). If you exited a company on unfriendly terms, best it come from you first, as opposed to a third party. It is human nature to try to

Get the Job!

This Top 10 countdown can help you successfully navigate the interview process.

By **KARI MUSICK**, The Liberty Group

10. Resume. Your resume should include all the companies you have worked for, as well as titles and dates of employment, broken down by position if applicable. It should also include quantifiable accomplishments. For example, "As an assistant manager I took delinquency from \$100,000 to \$1,000 in three months." It should also include education and memberships with industry associations.

9. References. Do you have three professional references ready to put on an application? Professional references most likely will mean a previous supervisor, not a co-worker. Make sure that you have names and correct phone numbers. Also, have you validated these references? Do you know what they will say about you?

8. Prepare. Do your research on the company you are interviewing with. The Internet is a valuable tool. Know the history, the product type, the background of the leadership team. Shop the properties, preferably in person – at minimum by phone. Also, if appropriate in the interview, let the interviewers know that you have done your homework.

7. Be punctual. Punctual means be early – but not too early. Ten minutes is enough time to arrive, check in, stop by the restroom to freshen up and review your notes. Drive to the location beforehand, in traffic if necessary, to determine how long your travel time will be. Do not rely on an estimate – you never know when traffic or the weather could change abruptly.

6. Smile. Be friendly. Offer a firm handshake. Make eye contact.

5. Look the part. Dress for the job you want to have, not the job you currently have. Err on the conservative side; an interview is not the time to try the latest fashion trends. Nor is it the time to dress casually, even if your current environment is casual. If you need to change before the interview to avoid any red flags, do so. Neutral colors like blue, gray or black are a must, as are clothes that fit properly. For women, make sure that jewelry and makeup are minimal. You don't want clanking jewelry or glittery eye shadow to distract the interviewers.

4. Ask questions. Asking questions shows your interest. As you interview with different people, you can ask your top three questions with each to get different perspectives on the position and the company. Don't, however, ask the "Me" questions. "Me" questions include questions about salary, benefits, vacation, insurance, etc. The questions you should be asking: Why is the position open? What do you expect the candidate to do the first 30-60-90 days to be successful? What is the growth potential of the individual/the company?

3. Bring a folio/pad/pen. Ask the interviewer if you may take notes, and take them. You can also have your prepared questions written down. Use a secondary page to jot down your personal notes if you need them – your strengths, your weaknesses and additional accomplishments that are not on your resume. Also bring extra copies of your resume. You never know when someone might ask, "Do you have time to interview with my supervisor?"

2. Ask for the job! Ask when they expect to make an offer. Ask how they see you in the position. Their answers may give you the opportunity to clarify a concern. If you absolutely do not want the job, be gracious, say thank you and make your exit.

1. Write a thank-you note. If you must use e-mail to get a thank-you out immediately, do so, then follow up with a handwritten thank-you note. Make sure that punctuation and spelling are correct and that it is legible. The ideal situation would be to already have the envelope stamped and addressed so that when you finish the interview you can sit in your car, write the note and then drop it immediately in the mail. Reiterate in the note that you want the job!

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Should a prospective employer discover the information from anyone other than the candidate, it could be perceived as though the candidate is hiding something, is not trustworthy and potentially a credibility concern.

avoid discussing an uncomfortable topic such as termination or unexpected resignation, but quite frankly, these things do indeed happen. If it is not addressed during the interview process only to be uncovered during reference checks, it might very well work against you. Should a prospective employer discover the information from anyone other than the candidate, it could be perceived as though the candidate is hiding something, is not trustworthy and potentially a credibility concern. In fact, had the hiring authority have known up front of the termination, they might very well have been understanding. Remember: Honesty is always the best policy.

THE EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE

If you are the hiring authority, please be considerate of the candidate and make sure that you have his or her permission to do the reference inquiry. If the candidate is employed, the last thing you want to do is put his or her current job in jeopardy. Tailor your questions to be specific and well thought-out. The purpose of the reference check is to gather as much information as you possibly can to determine if this is the right candidate. Below are questions you might consider asking:

1. Confirm this person's association to the candidate. Did he or she supervise this person, or were they associates?

2. Find out about the candidate's work ethic. Not just punctuality and dependability, but did this person's core work values line up with what was expected of him or her?

3. If the candidate was in a supervisory position, find out about his or her management style.

4. Briefly review the resume with the person giving the reference. Confirm that dates, titles and job description are correct. Should there be particular information such as accomplishments or product type (tax-credit, new construction, etc.), verify that information as well.

5. Is this person eligible for rehire? Would he or she be rehired for the same position or considered for something entirely different? If so, why?

6. Find out about strengths and weaknesses.

7. Did other employees enjoy working with the candidate?

8. Why did the candidate leave the position?

9. What is the top accomplishment that the candidate achieved during his or her employment?

10. What is the No. 1 thing about the candidate that would make a potential employer want to hire him or her?

THE BIG PICTURE

If more than one candidate is under consideration for the position, take the time to do references on each candidate and compare the answers. While the facts speak for themselves, the soft skills and how the person approaches his or her job can only be learned from someone who has worked side by side with the candidate. Also, take into consideration just how recently the person giving the reference actually worked with the candidate. An area that could have used improvement five years ago could have very well have been developed and corrected down the line.

Remember, the intent of references is not to disqualify the person from an offer. After all, had the candidate not interviewed well and showed promise, that person would not be in consideration to begin with. References are meant to help a prospective employer learn more about an individual and help the hiring authority truly understand what that person can bring to the table. ★

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