

Reference Check Guide

Completing reference checks is a critical part of the selection process. A thorough reference check may produce additional information you need to know to insure that the most suitable candidate is hired. It is a way to clarify, verify, and add data to what has been learned in the interview and from other portions of the selection process.

Checking references can be a time consuming task, and it may be tempting to just do a cursory verification of a few facts or give up on contacting a reference who does not return a phone call. Because the cost of a hiring mistake is high, it is critical to invest the time need that results in making a good hiring decision.

- Decide who will conduct reference checks.
- Ask each reference the same set of questions.
- Obtain at least three employment references – do not stop at one regardless of how negative or positive it may be.
- Never reveal to the candidate the information received from a previous employer or other reference. This information should be kept confidential out of respect for the reference and candidate.

Legality of Reference Checks

In the State of Oregon, an employer has a qualified or conditional privilege to make a defamatory statement (a statement that harms reputation) about the conduct of current or former employees to prospective employers. This privilege exists for truthful statements. It is legal for a prospective supervisor to consider information learned from a reference check in making hiring decisions as long as the information is job related. In fact, employers can be held liable for not adequately checking references. This is called “negligent hiring.”

The same discrimination laws apply to reference checking as apply to interviewing. You cannot ask questions regarding sex, health, previous job injuries, marital status, age, disabilities, religion, color, national origin, veteran status, sexual orientation for the purpose of using that information in your hiring decision.

Types of References

- *Employment references*, even if employment was as a volunteer, are the best source of information. On-the-job performance is the most useful predictor of future success.
 - Obtain reference information (i.e., name, phone, etc.) from the candidate and authorization to make contact.
 - If the candidate does not wish the current supervisor to be contacted, honor the request but

inform the candidate that if he/she becomes a finalist you will need a current employment reference.

- *Personal references* (relatives, friends, teachers, and clergy) generally have limited value.
- *Human Resource Office*: Information available from a human resource office is usually limited to dates of employment, salary, eligibility for re-hire, and reason for leaving.
- *Written references*: Do not rely solely on written references presented to you by candidates. Many are written at the time of termination and some employers may over-inflate the applicant's qualifications.

Planning: a Key Part of Reference Checking

It is important that the solicited information relates directly to the applicant's ability to carry out the responsibilities of the position. It is important to plan the questions you will ask each reference for each applicant. You should also develop specific questions that will help clarify any information on individual candidates.

To facilitate a uniform, structured approach and create an easy means of record keeping, prepare a list of questions that elicit information about the candidate's ability to perform the positions responsibilities, and the candidate's skills and qualifications.

Questioning Techniques

Opening the Reference Check

- Identify yourself and the applicant and briefly describe the position.
- Assure the reference that the information they provide you will be held in confidence.
- Ask the reference if he or she is willing to talk with you and if this is a good time.

Conducting the Reference Check

- Listen for verbal cues during the conversation, i.e., tone of voice; hesitation; vague answers.
- As a standard practice, the following areas should be explored:
 - confirmation of employment dates (month and year);
 - job titles (formal and informal);
 - dependability and follow through on assignments;
 - reason for termination;
 - eligibility for rehire (A former employer's reluctance to rehire should be cause for concern, however, some firms have a general policy prohibiting rehires. If this is the case it should be noted.);
 - performance problems/discipline;
 - strengths/weaknesses