



# Reference Checks

Benefits, Weaknesses & Questions

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# Reference Checks - Benefits, Weaknesses & Questions

## Benefits of Reference Checks

One of the classic tools for recruitment is the reference check. Applicants are expected to provide three references, which are meant to provide insight into the quality of the applicant's potential.

While resumes, cover letters, CVs, and even interviews all provide information that can show you whether or not an applicant is qualified for your company, references provide information that all other application information doesn't, and that makes it a valuable addition to your recruitment practices.

## How Reference Checks Help You

References have several benefits that make them an important part of recruitment, including:

- **Personal** - References are your opportunity to learn more about the individual's abilities from people that actually know them, not just from a piece of paper and your first impressions. It's your way of verifying that the person that they say they are is who they actually are, and not just someone amazing at first impressions.
- **Preparedness** - Reference checks also tell you something about the person. Was the reference clearly prepared for your call? Did they choose good references? Did they have references for you at all? A shocked reference that doesn't provide a glowing review tells you that the candidate didn't prepare them, and that says something about them as applicants.
- **Values** - Who the applicant chooses as a reference also tells you something about the person's values, and what they

consider important. Applicants that choose great references do so because they have thought about their choices, bonded with important people, etc.

Reference checks have their flaws, but they are also extremely beneficial for many positions.

## What to Ask

Of course, references are only valuable if you know which questions to ask. You need to make sure that you're asking everyone you call questions that tell you something genuine about the applicant.

Try your best to stay away from personality questions or clichés, like "hard worker" questions. Most references will say positive things (and in some cases they may be legally forced to say positive things) and you're not necessarily going to get much information. It's good for rapport, but not much else.

You'll want to ask questions that can get real answers to help you make decisions, including:

- What was NAME's role in PROJECT?
- What program would you say NAME showed the most proficiency?
- What are some examples of ideas that NAME helped create and put into action?

Use the reference to verify information, find out more about the person's ideas, and see if the reference verifies skills that you need on the job without prompting. Don't worry too much about whether the reference likes the individual – they almost always will. Worry more about trying to get real information from them in a way that forces them to say what the person truly did, and what they're actually good at.

References can be very valuable, and there is a reason they have been a common part of the application process. Just make sure you're using them well, and you can get some real information from them.

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### Weaknesses of Reference Checks

Reference checks are a genuinely valuable tool for recruitment. They give you personal information about the applicant and they're a rare opportunity to validate some of the claims on the resume. They tell you something about the preparedness of the candidate, and they give you more information to use to gauge the applicant's qualifications.

But reference checks also have their flaws, and when used incorrectly they can actually impede your recruitment practices. The following are some of the weaknesses of using reference checks as part of your own recruitment.

- **Bad Questions** – It starts with bad questions. You should never use a reference for the sake of using a reference. You should always have questions to ask. For example, you can use a reference to verify resume information, or to find out if there are skills the applicant has that could be extremely valuable. Asking the wrong questions means you're learning very little, while convincing yourself you're learning more.
- **Reference's Personality** – Another problem is that, in a way, you're actually giving the reference an interview, and if the reference is an unfriendly person, or a shy talker, or someone that just happens to be very busy when you call, their personality may be affecting your judgment in a way that isn't fair to the applicant, and could have you shy away from a great applicant for the wrong reasons.
- **Number of References** – Traditionally, most employers ask for three references. But only one reference may actually be necessary. If an applicant

worked closely with one individual more than others, than the other two are superfluous. In addition, the other two simply water down what the important one says. Yes, it's nice to know that your applicant can get three references, but often what you learn from just one is enough.

- **Lying and Legal Issues** – It's not always possible to ask some of the questions you want to ask, nor can the other person say what they want to say. There are legal issues at play that prevent people from sharing what they want to share. References are also under no obligation to tell the truth, and the reference themselves may not be the person that you think they are when you call.
- **Reason for Calling** – The traditional belief is that more information is always better. But there are some exceptions. It's not uncommon for some employers to call references when they've already made their decision. At that point, references become far less valuable. Make sure you know why you're calling, and have given yourself a good "reason," otherwise the only thing calling a reference will do is make you less excited for a hire that you're going to make anyway.

Overall, reference checks do have their value. But they're only as valuable as the way you use them, and there are many other strategies you'll also want to use if you hope to be successful.

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### Sample Questions for Reference Checks

#### Basic Reference Questions

- What were the beginning and ending employment dates for this individual?
- How long have you known this individual and in what capacity?
- What was this individual's beginning and ending salary?
- What positions did the individual hold?
- Did this individual earn promotions?
- What were the individual's most recent job duties?
- Why did the individual leave your company?
- How many days was he/she absent from or late to work in the last year? (By law, you cannot inquire into medically related absences.)
- Is there any reason why your company would not rehire this individual?
- Would you recommend this individual for a position at another company? Why or why not?
- How did this individual's performance compare to other employees with similar job duties?
- In your opinion, what are the individual's strengths? Weaknesses?
- How would you describe the individual's overall performance?
- Is there anything of significance you'd like to add?
- What kind of job is best suited for this individual's abilities? Do you think this individual will perform well as a [job title]?
- On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 as low and 10 as high), how easy was he/she to supervise?

#### Interpersonal Skills

- Describe (candidate's) interaction with management and peers. Did this individual get along well with management and peers?
- Describe (candidate's) work style in interacting with supervisors, subordinates, peers and people outside the organization.
- How would you describe (candidate's) ability to work successfully with others toward a set of shared goals? Can you provide a specific example of a time when you felt he/she specifically contributed to a successful outcome? What was this individual's role relative to that of others?
- Would you describe (candidate) as a team player? If so, why?
- Give me an example where the outcome was unexpected or not what he/she hope for. How did he/she handle it?

#### Leadership

- How would you describe (candidate's) motivational style? Was this individual a motivated self-starter?
- How would you describe the individual's leadership, managerial or supervisory skills?
- Did the candidate supervise other people? How many? How effectively? Can he/she create a team effort?
- Describe his/her interaction with subordinates. Was the individual respected by subordinates?
- Describe the individual's ability to attract and counsel top talent.
- Describe the individual's ability to manage crisis, pressure or stress?  
Communication/Planning
- How would you describe his/her communication skills both orally and in writing?

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- How would you describe (candidate's) ability to actively listen and understand the needs of his/her constituent groups and deliver quality services or effective systems to meet those needs? Can you tell me about a time when you observed his/her strength in this regard?
- Give me an example of how he/she sells ideas and projects to others.
- Can you describe a situation where (candidate) needed to influence others in order to achieve a goal or objective? What were the circumstances/ outcome?
- In the (job specialty?) area, how would you rate (candidate's) ability to understand complex issues and prepare clear and accurate presentations, project plans and proposals to meet those issues/ challenges? In your experience, can he/she make a compelling business case?

## Judgment

- How would you describe his/her decision making process? Did the individual make sound and timely decisions?
- How well does he/she make decisions, particularly when dealing with incomplete or ambiguous information? Can you give me an example?
- There are times in complex and culturally diverse organizations like ours when one may need to get things done without being able to rely on formal lines of power and hierarchy. Can you tell me about a time when (candidate) needed to get something done and it just didn't seem viable to work through a formal process? How did he/she handle that? What was the outcome?

## Dependability

- Describe some of this individual's core professional values. Did the individual demonstrate honesty and integrity?
- How do you rate the individual's ability to plan short-term? Long-term?

## Performance

- How would you describe the individual's technical skills?
- In consideration of his/her work style, can you give me an example of his/her ability to focus and complete projects and work in a timely and through manner?
- What did you find that motivated (candidate) to do his/her best work?
- How would you describe the quantity and quality of output generated by this candidate?
- How does he/she respond to directions?
- What was the greatest challenge in supervising?
- From what I've told you about this position, what do you perceive as (candidate's) greatest learning curve coming into this position?
- Would you comment on (candidate's):
  - Organizational skills
  - Attention to detail
  - Ability to adapt to changing priorities

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