

Reference Checking Do's, -'s and Don'ts

This article by John C. Patterson of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center provides advice for nonprofits on reference checking.

by John C. Patterson

Do's

Start by identifying yourself and the organization you represent. Next, inform the contact that the applicant has given permission for the organization to contact the reference and request information regarding position-related abilities and qualifications (assuming, of course, that you have asked the applicant for permission or included a waiver on the application form). Use a script prepared in advance to guide your questions. Try to verify information on the application and probe more deeply into specific qualifications for the position being filled.

If possible, make the initial contact via telephone call. This enables you to receive information more swiftly. Also, you have an opportunity to ask questions and clarify the information you are receiving, and you can assess the nonverbal information conveyed by tone of voice, hesitancy, emphasis, and demeanor.

Toni Weisgrau, a human resources consultant, suggests that when you contact a former employer for references, there are some basic rules that will help you get the information you are seeking:

- * Make your managerial or supervisory position clear to the former employer, and give a brief description of the position you are filling.
- * Ask only position-related questions. When you are questioning a reference about an applicant's personal characteristics, the questions should be relevant to the position responsibilities or conditions.
- * Do not discuss information that would be unlawful to use in the placement process, such as race or sex, which are almost always impermissible areas of inquiry concerning prospective employees and generally ill-advised for screening volunteers as well.

After you make an initial contact by telephone, if the individual giving the reference asks you to send a request in writing with a copy of the release signed by the applicant, respond quickly. Try to negotiate a deadline for returning the forms to you. By establishing this contact, you have set the stage for contacting the reference again if you do not receive the information by the agreed-upon deadline. You have also established a point of contact that you can use to clarify information once the reference form has been returned.

When you contact an applicant's personal references, remember that the applicant selected them for the positive impression he or she thought they would give. Nonetheless, take the task seriously. References sometimes reveal critical information about applicants.

You should verify the nature of the relationship between the applicant and personal reference and the length of time they have known each other. You may be able to increase the objectivity of the information you receive from the reference if you stress the kinds of responsibilities that the applicant will have if selected for the position.

Don'ts

The most common reference-checking mistake is to miss an opportunity to get critical information from the respondent. Try to avoid:

- * **Asking leading questions.** When you are checking references, let the reference provide the information. Instead of "Tom Jones told us that you and he have been friends for ten years. Is that right?", you might want to ask, "How long have you and Tom Jones been friends?"
- * **Asking questions that can be answered by a simple "yes" or "no."** You need to phrase the questions so that references are required to think about their responses and to answer in their own words.
- * **Asking questions that are related to an applicant's health or disability.** Under the provisions of the ADA, in addition to the prohibition against asking an applicant about his or her health and disabilities, employers are also prohibited from making such inquiries to third parties concerning the applicant's health and disabilities. You can, however, make nondisability-related inquiries concerning an applicant's "lifestyle" as long as those questions are not likely to elicit information about the existence, nature, or severity of a disability. (McKelway 1994)
- * **Asking questions that are too general.** Some information you need is very specific relative to the nature of the position and the risks you have identified.

For more information on the topic of reference checking, **see Staff Screening Tool Kit: Building a Strong Foundation Through Careful Staffing**, published by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.

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