

The Hidden Pearls of Reference Checking

by Rebekah Goodwin

We have all been in that situation where we have found the perfect person for the opening we have available, fantastic resume, great skills, interviewed perfectly. We don't need to check on this person out, they are practically part of the team already – let's just offer them the job and be done with it.

Six months later you are struggling to manage your new staff member – some of what they said at interview is seemingly a little dubious, if only you knew what to expect you could have managed it better from the start.

Reference checking is one of the most valuable tools available in the recruitment process, particularly in terms of predicting future behavior. It is the only opportunity that you get to see into a prospective employee's past and understand how they work under various circumstances, environments and management styles.

While it's occasionally a tool to rule out a candidate, more often it should be viewed as a means to prepare yourself to be able to get the very best from your new charge.

I am often reminded of a time where a candidate of mine received two terrible reference checks, got the job regardless, and turned out to be a star performer. In fact the reference checks reflected far more on those giving the reference rather than on the candidate. By reading between the lines, the two managers clearly had similar styles, and for various reasons this approach did not work for the candidate. Using the information provided and working closely with the client and the candidate, we put in place a strategy for them to correct some of the issues of the past. Of course it worked fabulously and they both flourished in the role.

Tips for talking to referees:

When asking questions to a previous or even current employers, it is important to begin by establishing their relationship with the candidate and if they are qualified to comment. Realistically we want to talk to referees that have managed the candidate, have been peers or perhaps in some cases, clients.

If that candidate has not provided the right referees, it is fine to ask for others to be given, or you can even ask directly if you can speak with a specific manager. If the candidate refuses, it is absolutely worthwhile probing the reasons deeper as

to why.

The sorts of questions you ask, should not be terribly different from those you might ask in an interview; however you might want to tailor them to match any areas of concern or suspicion you might have.

Some typical questions I like to ask include:

- What was the candidate's role in your organisation?
- Tell me about the candidate's role and responsibilities?
- Were there any particular achievements of note you would mention?
- Tell me about how he coped in stressful situations?
- How did she perform working in a team environment?
- How would you manage him to get the best out of him?
- What areas do you think she should work on? What are her weaknesses?
- Why did he leave / Is he considering leaving?

Most importantly listen for what the referee does and does not say. People don't generally like to give poor references, however they will tend to hesitate or omit when it comes to areas of weakness or controversy. Assure the referee that you are looking to understand how best to manage the candidate and probe around the issue more deeply.

Do's and Don'ts

As with any situation where you are dealing with a person's private and personal information, it is most important that you act carefully and treat that information with the respect it deserves.

Do always ask a candidate to provide referees and their contact numbers and advise them when you plan to call.

Don't do checks without a candidate's knowledge with someone they have not given approval to check. If you have such a referee, ask the candidate's permission. If they have a problem with it, investigate that further.

Do always do a minimum of two, and preferably three references. We are looking for a range of views here, and one just will not do, regardless of how good it is.

Don't reject a candidate because of one poor reference check. There is often subtext to what people say in these situations. If you get one bad reference

check amongst two or three, approach the candidate and let them give their side of the story. Go back and ask other referee's to see if there might be other reasons for the response.

Do use the information as a management tool. As I mentioned earlier, you will rarely get such an opportunity to understand a candidate's behaviour before he starts. Use it wisely and you will have a great start for your new employee.

Whether you do the job yourself, or have a consultant do the checks for you, make sure you get the most from this valuable tool.

Rebekah Goodwin specializes in providing recruitment solutions across all industries to local businesses. Rebekah understands the special needs of small business. With robust processes and systems, she provides a quality and affordable service for those companies looking to improve the quality of their team.

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