

Resumes Win Interviews, References Win Job Offers

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Inquiring minds want to know, and no minds are more inquiring than those about to hire you. Rest assured, you will be investigated. As a rule of thumb, the better the job and the higher the pay, the tougher the screening process. If you are up for a good job at a visible company, your references and past employers will be checked in great detail. Your list of references is simply the beginning of the investigation a prospective employer will conduct.

When a prospective employer has completed the first round of interviews and you are among the top candidates, its next logical step is to check your references and interview those individuals to whom you reported. Are you certain these individuals will seal the deal for you, or will they blow it away? If you are like most people, you probably haven't given your references much thought. Instead, you have focused on your resume, interviewing skills, networking, and what to wear to the interview. Now the focus shifts.

Your biggest concern should be the quality of your references and recommendations from past employers, because they can make or break your chances. About half of all references that get checked range from mediocre to poor, so it is very possible that the great job you lost out on at the last moment had nothing to do with your skill level. It could have had more to do with what a reference or past employer said about you. So, if you are concerned that someone, somewhere, might be giving you a bum rap, you are probably right. That's a frightening scenario when your livelihood is at stake.

Here is a sampling of the damaging comments HR people and line managers hear when they check references:

- "Our company policy prohibits us saying anything. We can only verify dates of employment and title." Then the reference goes on to say something like, "Check his references very, very carefully."
- "Are you certain he gave my name as a reference?"
- "After we settle our lawsuit..."
- "Let me see what the paperwork says I am able to give out regarding _____."
- "Is he still in this field?"

References and past employers won't call and warn you that they are not going to be complimentary. The reference situation is ever changing and therefore very volatile because of shifting company policies (not that many employees choose to follow them anyway), new employees in HR departments, new laws governing references, and company liability for giving references.

You are well advised to take more control of your career momentum by finding out what every potential reference will say about you. If the odds hold, as they will, those references will range from stellar to negative; yet when you know what someone is going to say about you, you can pass on your best references with greater confidence. You will also have the opportunity to stop references from saying things that are not true or inaccurate.

Increasing Your Chances of a Good Reference. Here are some general rules of thumb to maximize the tone and accuracy of your references.

1. Make sure your records are correct. Occasionally an interviewee looks bad because his former HR department did not have the same job date and title information in his file as he did on his resume. Data entry or communications errors are not unusual, so check with your HR department to ensure that their records correspond to yours. Conflicting data will be perceived as a big negative to a prospective employer.

2. Maintain active and positive relationships with your references. Stay in touch over the phone or over coffee. Keep the reference up-to-date about your progress, and make sure you have the most up-to-date information about them. If the reference's title (or name) has changed, or if they've left their position and you've provided old information to the prospective employer, it doesn't look good.

3. Advise a reference about an important opportunity. To avoid burning out your references, you don't need to call about every single job opportunity. However, if a particular position is very important to you, call the reference and give them details about what the company may be looking for.

4. Know reporting relationships. Even though you've given the senior vice president's name as a reference, the prospective employer may resort to calling the director you reported to because she can't reach the senior VP. Even though you have not given that person's name as a reference, it is on the application that you probably filled out. You may want to advise your former boss about the potential for a reference check and explain what the company is looking for.

5. Know your company's policy. Although federal law restricts reference information, some states now allow more extensive disclosure. Know which regulations and policies govern your company. In addition, be aware that some employees will break company policy. Make sure that works in your favor by checking with references to gain an understanding of what they might say.

6. Don't rely on relatives or letters of recommendation. You are well advised not to let Uncle John regale a prospective employer about your antics as a youth. Also, although letters of recommendation can be helpful, information such as titles and even names can change over time. Make sure that the information on your letter of recommendation is correct by contacting the reference periodically.

7. Use a reference-checking service. If you want help in providing good references or if you find that you are losing too many opportunities after several interviews with an organization, you might want to commission a professional reference-checking service. Check to ensure that the service has the professional and legal personnel that can develop a strategic use of your references. Typical service fees range from \$59 to \$99 per reference checked, depending on level of job position being sought.