

## Regarding References

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### **References are often the last tool considered in a job hunt.**

When you entered this job hunt, you knew you needed a résumé. A cover letter was a very good idea, too, and you got right on it. You may have even considered creating a follow up "Thank you" note for all those interviews (because you are very smart). You may have found yourself sitting at your computer late one night writing the perfect resignation letter (either the most difficult or most fun of compositions), being careful not to burn any bridges. But what about these references? You know you need them. You know that at some point in the interview game, if the hiring manager is on top of things, he or she is going to ask for them. But when? And from whom should these referrals come; past employers, co-workers, colleagues, mentors, professors, friends? Should they be written, or is it better for the hiring manager to speak to the referral (on the phone)? How far back in time can you go with your references before they are considered "too old," or no longer quite as valid or valuable?

Your résumé may proudly state that you have them available, "References available," but the truth is that statement is as far as many job hunters get, before scrambling to put something together at the request of a hiring manager or potential employer at the last minute.

When should you begin gathering references? You should be gathering these throughout your career life, whether you have a current need for them or not. Every time you leave a position, for example, you should be collecting letters, names and contact information from your employer, co-workers and clients who would be willing to express, either in writing or as a future contact, the level of services and work you have provided, even if the next job has been secured without them. When you graduate from college, getting letters of recommendation from professors and mentors should be one of the first things on your "To do" list. It may be a couple of years down the road before you need these references, but when you need them, when the job you are targeting is perfect and you want the best opportunity to beat out the other potential candidates for the position. . . good (no, great) references can make the difference.

Another reason why it is so important to gather these references immediately after graduation or resignation from a position is because at that moment your accomplishments, talents, skills and achievements are as clear to your reference as they may ever be. Think about what this reference or contact person may remember about you five years from now, versus what they know about you today. The achievement that brings such a wide smile of gratitude so soon after it's been accomplished may dim as the years move forward.

Get your references in writing, even if you have to offer to write the reference letter yourself. And try to get them on company letterhead if at all possible. Many people don't have the time or inclination to write a lengthy letter, but will be glad to sign one if the information is accurate and presented well. Written letters of recommendation remain a strong indication of what you have to offer.

In addition to having written letters of recommendation, you want to be able to provide the potential employer or hiring manager with names of those who they may contact who know of your work ethics, talents and achievements. By speaking directly with your references, the hiring manager may have the opportunity to ask questions specific and relevant to the particular position you're targeting. Because of this, it's important that you contact these references immediately following an interview, to bring them up-to-speed regarding the position in question and any particular criteria addressed in the interview. A

prepared referral will provide much more enthusiastic and valuable information than one who is caught off-guard.

The information you provide to a potential employer regarding your reference contacts (in writing) should include: the referral's full name, their title (President, Owner, Manager, Producer, Program Director, Project Manager, etc.), the company they work for (ABC Corporation), their relationship to you (supervisor, employer, co-worker, mentor, professor, etc.) and a phone number or e-mail address where they may be reached.

Your references should be either current, individuals who have worked with you recently or have remained in contact with you on a regular basis and are familiar with your current career direction and achievements. Every employer or hiring manager is most interested in information that is the most current. Therefore, a referral who is familiar with your work during the most recent few years will be more valuable, from the potential employer's point of view, than a contact person whose last relevant experience with you was 10 or 15 years ago. This does not mean that you cannot include referrals who are from 10 in years in the past, but you should also include individuals who are familiar with your most recent work efforts and achievements.

What makes a good referral? A good referral addresses the personal and professional characteristics you have demonstrated in past positions or environments (relevant to the positions you are currently targeting), with a focus on the benefits or values of your contributions and efforts.

Simply put, a good referral encourages a potential employer view you as a valuable hire.

### **REFERENCE ROULETTE IS A HIGH STAKES GAME**

References. Everybody wants 'em, but nobody wants to give them.

If you ask most companies what kind of reference they will give on a former employee, they will probably tell you something that sounds like "name, rank and serial number only." They will verify that you worked for their organization, provide the dates that you worked there and perhaps notify how much you were making.

Now, if that same company is looking to fill your former position, you can bet they are going to try to get a lot more information than that when they do a reference check.

Welcome to the game of reference roulette. The very type of information that most companies want and need to make a good hire is the very stuff that they will not give out to someone else. Reference checking is a crap shoot, chancy at best. There are people who don't get hired because companies can't get any references on them. Others don't get hired because of a reference that said too much. Reference checking is a pain in everybody's aspirations, but it's an absolutely essential and necessary part of the process. Here are some of the things a potential employer is trying to find out when they do a reference check:

- 1. Fit.** Every company has a culture and a style that is unique to its operations. Facts on a resume, or dates of employment, don't tell anyone much about how you get along with co-workers and bosses. Do you work better solo or in a team? Do you handle pressure well?

**2. Legal Protection.** Hiring someone with a criminal record of violent behavior problems can open a company up for trouble with customers and co-workers. Lawsuits are also a possibility that can be avoided if these things are uncovered in the reference check.

**3. The Truth, the Whole Truth.** The best estimates from resume experts say that 50 percent of all resumes contain deliberate distortions of schools never attended, degrees never obtained, dates never worked, bosses who don't exist and work that was never done by the person. References can provide a good way to validate what is being said on an employment application or in a resume.

**4. Say What?** Skilled reference checkers and interviewers can read between the lines and get to what is really meant vs. what is being said. Since many reference givers are either prepped and scripted ahead of time, or worse, not prepared at all, they can inadvertently reveal as much about a person by what they do not say, as by what they actually do say. A good reference check will pick up on this information.

Since most companies will not officially divulge this sort of information, where will it come from? Friends, co-workers, former bosses and public agencies are some likely sources. You need to know what these sources are (and are not) willing to say about you if they are in fact contacted for a reference.

Unfortunately, many job seekers do a lousy job at lining up and preparing their references. They hope or assume that the reference will say nice things about them if called by a potential employer. Since they are too embarrassed to ask what kind of things might be said about them, they leave it to chance that there will be things that will help them get the job they want. This is a risky gamble. Here is what actually happens.

The potential reference usually doesn't have a clue what to say about you. They may like you and the work they know you for but that is not enough. In the hands of a good reference checker, they might say all sorts of things that are irrelevant-if not damaging to your chances of getting a job.

Let each reference know three things:

1. What job and companies you are looking at and who might be calling them for a reference.
2. What are the skills and attributes that you are selling and some of the things that they can speak about that validates those skills and attributes. Of course, these things must all be true and part of your mutual experience.
3. What areas to avoid if possible. For example: A former boss might think that a person who did a great job at work while going through a messy divorce deserves special mention in a reference check. The great work part is just fine. The messy divorce part could give a potential employer all sorts of doubt. It's irrelevant. Tell your reference to leave it out.

*Take great care of yourself-and your career.*