

HR insights

Common and Costly Mistakes: Checking References

Your employees are your biggest asset, but you do not want them to be a liability. Conducting proper reference checks are an outstanding and necessary resource to help verify that a candidate is reliable, capable and trustworthy.

When I check references, how can I get employers to provide more than “name, rank and serial number” about former employees?

Some employers only provide dates of employment, position held and salary due to fear of litigation when it comes to answering references checks of former employees. The following tips can help you get more information from references.

Prior to contacting references:

- Make sure employment applications include a statement that a pre-hire background check is required and that if an applicant provides false information on the application, it is grounds for rejection or termination.
- Have candidates sign a reference check release form that provides their consent to background checks being conducted, including contacting references and waiving any and all claims based on references given.
- Fax or send a copy of the candidate's reference check release form and

your credentials to the references you will be contacting.

- Ask candidates who may not be contacted as a reference and for what reason.

When contacting references:

- Be friendly and ask the potential candidate for information about his or

reference's responses. If it doesn't, this is an indication that the applicant may not have been truthful on other areas of the application.

- If you attempt to contact a reference several times, and you think you might be getting avoided, send a letter or email requesting that the reference contact you and copy the candidate. This will encourage the

Often when asked for a reference for a former employee, employers are only willing to provide job title, salary and dates of employment for fear of litigation. This is sometimes unavoidable, depending on the company's policy, but these tips can often help you get more information from references.

her references, so you have some icebreakers when starting the conversation.

- Let the reference know that you are looking for the best fit for both the candidate and your company, and you appreciate his or her candor.
- Ask the easy questions like dates of employment, responsibilities and earnings history first. These types of questions put no pressure on the respondents. This will also give you a chance to verify that all the candidate's information matches the

candidate to reach out to the reference and ask the person to speak with you.

- Even if the first reference is glowing, always get a second opinion.
- Check personal references as well as professional references. Personal references are often more candid and may be able to provide you with the names of additional professional references.
- Don't rely solely on the references that a candidate suggests. Ask the



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approved references for the names and numbers of other individuals within the organization that you may speak with regarding the candidate.

- A candidate always has room for at least some improvement in any given previous job. Be skeptical about references that can't find anything wrong with the candidate.
- Also be skeptical of neutral or negative comments from references. Half-hearted or back-handed praise speaks volumes—if you run into this, ask for specific examples to get a better idea of why the reference feels this way.
- Read between the lines when comments are made and politely ask references to explain broad generalizations. Often it is what is unsaid that gives you the greatest clues into what a reference may really think. Long pauses and tone of voice should not be ignored.
- Ask whether a candidate is or was eligible for rehire, and for what reasons.