

The Reference Check - - Quick Guide

A Guide to Checking the References of Prospective Employees

A WELL-CONDUCTED REFERENCE CHECK BENEFITS ALL STAKEHOLDERS

The primary objective of most job seekers is to secure employment in an occupation that is a good fit in all respects: e.g. the type of industry, job function, competencies, salary, work environment, personality.

When an applicant accepts a position for which they are unsuited, they could find themselves at odds with the goals of the company; and management's options in dealing with ensuing problems are often limited to initiating progressive discipline action - or - firing. Inappropriate placement followed by termination of employment can affect the individual in loss of self-esteem and income and result in financial loss for the company.

During economic downturns, some individuals overlook critical career issues in the desire to secure employment quickly. Depending on the need, one may accept a job that pays much less than a previous position, has far less responsibility attached to it, has little prospect for advancement, lacks the ability to motivate, pays a lower salary, is in an industry that

holds no intrinsic rewards for them, or is staffed by people with very different personalities. Once employed, they may be unable to successfully adjust expectations to what constitutes meaningful employment.

A company is better protected from an inappropriate placement when all stages of the hiring process including a reference check are completed in a systematic way. Some companies outsource such a service to an objective third party.

Essentially, after confirming the validity of claims made by the candidate and on the resume (degrees, diplomas, credentials), the Reference Checker's first task is to compile a list of reference questions to assist in decision-making, then accurately record referees' responses, and compare candidates' strengths, skills, abilities, experience, knowledge while trying to uncover any career-related "red flags".



W.N. ASSOCIATES INC.

Consultants in Human
Resources Management

WHY USE A REFERENCE CHECK?

- To confirm impressions about the candidate.
- To investigate concerns raised during the interview process.
- To substantiate or discredit claims made by a candidate and on their resume.
- To check out traits with low scores that were derived from testing.
- To get as much pertinent information as possible as part of decision-making.

AT WHAT POINT IN THE PROCESS IS A REFEREE BEST CONTACTED?

Check references after all other stages of the selection process are complete and you consider the individual to be skilled, eligible for the job function and a good fit to your organization.

Check after you have:

- Collected and screened resumes
- Completed preliminary interviews
- Compiled a short list
- Tested/assessed
- Interviewed in-depth and **usually before you make any offer of employment.**

WHO HAS THE INFORMATION YOU NEED?

Ask the candidate for the names, titles and telephone numbers of at least four individuals including bosses, a subordinate, peer, and a client or supplier as appropriate. Additionally you will usually be able to get information from the Human Resources (HR) Departments of the former employers or from the candidate's previous managers. A former supervisor may have a clearer

recollection of the individual and usually is able to clarify issues more fully than someone in HR.

But the Manager of HR will have access to records as well as the authority to release relevant information. You may wish to talk to both individuals when required. **Keep current Human Rights legislation top of mind during all communication.**

GUARD AGAINST FUTURE CHALLENGES

To guard against future challenges to your hiring decisions, it is recommended that, as conversations with each referee are completed, HR retain a full record of the process in a Recruiting File or employee personnel file.

- To defend against accusations of discrimination, accumulate all records of reference checks in an organized file that is easily retrievable. Specify the process used: phone, snail mail or e-mail.
- Maintain an accurate list of referees with name, title, company, date, time, subject matter.
- Note the quality, relevance and adequacy of information from each referee. Keep organized annotations of comments made / received.
- To limit exposure of sensitive information, store copies of all confidential records received in a separate confidential file, apart from the general personnel file - - - credit, medical, driving, criminal, etc.
- Maintain a call and/or e-mail 'trail' of all contacted referees. File all replies.
- Keep a dated, signed record of all material removed and returned to the Reference File.

© WILLIS NEWTON, B.A., M.Ed., *President*, W.N. ASSOCIATES INC.

5650 Yonge Street • Suite 1500 • The Xerox Tower • Toronto ON M2M 4G3

O: 416-229-9905 • F: 416-222-2448 • E: willis@wnassociates.com

*"Customized, Professional Outplacement Counselling
and Management Coaching that achieve results"*

Since 1981

GATHERING INFORMATION

Any information you receive is based on another person's perspective; therefore, build a comparison/contrast list of traits by referring to a number of former employers/managers. As a general rule, there is a reasonable attempt made by referees not to prejudice a person's chances at employment, but be on guard for information gathered from an

embittered former supervisor. You may have to ignore information that you consider unreliable, irrelevant, obviously inaccurate or unwarranted. There are also occasions when the tributes are so flattering as to cause suspicion about their accuracy. Hone your skills at listening, inference, and intuitive judgment.

BEGINNING THE CALL

- Ask for the former Director / Manager / Supervisor / HR Representative by name.
- Clearly introduce yourself by name, title and company.
- Succinctly articulate your purpose for calling; have a script prepared if necessary.
- Briefly outline the job and requirements for the position that you are interviewing for.
- Ask if this is a convenient time to talk. Treat the like a trusted associate.
- Allow the referee to call back or e-mail you as needed; offer several time slots.
- Clearly state phone and cell numbers or an e-mail address where you can be reached or request a more appropriate time to call back.
- **Open a file and record all communication.**

ESTABLISH A DIALOGUE USING THE TEN QUESTIONS BELOW

1. Please describe <person> as an employee. What were the primary responsibilities and accountabilities assigned to him/her?
2. Please give me an example that demonstrates how well he/she learns on the job. What courses were completed?
3. Please state an example of his/her conscientiousness and motivational level to do an excellent job?
4. When did he/she leave your company? Under what circumstances? How long did he/she work for you?
5. Was there ever a concern about absenteeism, punctuality, attitude, time wasting, or interactions with others?
6. What should I know about <person's> work that would be important for me to know as his/her employer?
7. I am considering this person for the position of <job>. Would you consider rehiring this individual for such a position? Why?
8. Please confirm how his/her compensation was structured, the starting and ending salary.
9. <Person> has listed several impressive accomplishments. Please give me your views on his/her accomplishments while working for your firm?
10. What is your general, overall impression of <person> as a <function>? How would his/her subordinates describe him/her?

THE TWELVE CRITICAL MANAGEMENT TRAITS

Each individual interviewer will have priorities on which to base technical, behavioural and targeted questions.

The twelve traits listed are proposed as essential to success in a management function. Following your initial interaction with the referee, these can be examined in addition to any other traits and skills that you may wish to investigate. Create and ask situational (behavioural) based questions according to the traits you need checked. Record responses and request a rating on each trait ranging from 'very poor' to 'excels' on the summary chart at right.

	very poor	poor	average	good	excels
1. Problem Solving	1. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Decisiveness	2. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Industriousness	3. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Efficiency / Organization	4. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Team Leadership	5. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Judgement	6. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Innovativeness	7. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Assertiveness	8. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Patience	9. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Tolerance for Stress	10. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Independence	11. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. People Skills	12. <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS

- When candidates are currently employed, get their permission prior to calling their employer for a reference. They may want to keep the job search confidential.
- Keep the conversation flowing.
- Write quotes and relevant details and a summary of the referee's comments followed by areas to investigate at a subsequent interview.
- Know your questions well enough to avoid repetition. Some questions will be answered before you ask them directly. Make notes to save time.
- Listen intently in order to garner a general impression of the candidate.
- Some companies have a policy of only releasing information that pertains to job function and years of employment. Others will only confirm information about dates, title and salary.
- Many companies will release information only when the former employee has given written consent.
- Pursue any comment that appears to be cause for concern. Be aware of words or phrases that might tip you off to work-related problem areas that need to be delved into more rigorously.

Willis M.L. Newton

"Willis has a reputation for building strong, confidential client relationships based on trust and mutual respect."

"I found Willis to be a client-oriented professional and trusted coach."

"As head of W.N. Associates, Willis delivers results for complex and involved assignments."