



HOW TO PICK OR CHECK OR GIVE A REFERENCE

I think references are a funny tool. In my experience, few folks really know what they're looking for when they check references. It's a sensitive topic when to check references and the generally accepted practice in this industry is to check references either just before or just after making an offer (in which instance, the offer is frequently made contingent upon the references checking out ok.) In reality, by the time most people check references, they're already psychologically wedded to the decision to hire the candidate and they're simply looking for confirmation that the decision was right. In fact, a recent study showed that most reference checkers routinely discount negative feedback they receive.

Likewise, most references have no idea what information the reference checker is after. And, worse yet, most candidates have no idea what their references will say about them!

EMPLOYERS:

Know the purpose of your reference request. Do you want to know about the candidate's integrity, skill set, ability to negotiate, reactions under pressure, or are you going through the motions just to make sure you don't hear anything really bad?

Few references will flat out trash someone, so you'll need to ask questions (preferably open ended ones) that will let you glean the information you're after. You should have an outline of questions before you begin reference checking and you should ideally ask the same questions of the various references so you get a solid picture of the candidate.

Are you a small shop that needs an "all hands on deck" kind of mentality? Ask a question like ... Tell me about a time when John gave his all? Or better yet, you might ask about the dynamics of the culture in which John and the reference worked and what "moniker" John has or what position he'd best be suited to play on a sports team. This will let you see how his teammates view him. Ideally, you will have asked questions of the candidate like this so you can get a sense of how his view of his role compares to the view of others who worked with him.

You might want to see if he's a hot head. Ask something like ... Tell me about the most challenging/interesting/toughest situation you've seen John in.

Describe a little about your firm, the culture, your team and the challenges John might face and ask the reference for advice he has for you in helping John adapt to his new environment. Be sure to probe to understand how John and the reference know each other, whether they socialize(d) together and other questions so you will have some context in which to place the comments you hear.

Always ask ... What else should I know about John? Would you hire him for your team? What role would you put him in if you had the chance? Who else should I talk to? Who knows him best? What has John told you about the opportunity? Be gracious and thank them for both their candor and for their willingness and time to speak with you.

Oh, one more thing, you shouldn't ask for references unless you intend to check them. Asking for references sends a message to the candidate that you're ready to make an offer. To ask for references and not make time to promptly check them is poor form and makes the candidate think you aren't taking the process (or them) seriously. Be thoughtful when you ask for references, too. How many do you want (3? 5?) and what kind of references do you want from the candidate? Personal, professional, supervisors, peers, clients? And, don't ask for someone from their current company if they haven't told their supervisor they're looking – unless you're making the offer contingent upon the references checking out and the candidate has accepted the offer. And, then only check that current employer reference last so you are confident you're ready to go with John before you make him tell his boss he's leaving. Blowing John's cover at his current job and then not hiring him (unless his boss tells you something horrible) is just plain mean.

REFERENCES:

If you're identified as a reference for someone, try to learn about the company he's going to, what John will be doing, why John thinks he's a fit and what the interviewer liked about John most and areas where the interviewer might have concern, so your comments can be persuasive and useful. Return a call for a reference request promptly. Employers can think that you have something negative to say when you don't return their call and that can kill an offer to a candidate. Most importantly, be honest! That's what you'd want from someone you were asking for a reference on a prospective employee. Of course, ideally, you'd have heard all this from the candidate when he asked you to be a reference.

What was that? You didn't even know you were going to be a reference for John? Didn't even know he was looking for a job? Hadn't heard from him in years? Shame on you John!

CANDIDATES: You **MUST** talk to your references in advance of presenting them as a reference. You should ask their permission and find out where and how they would like to be contacted. Brief them on the opportunity, who will call them, why you want this job, how excited you are, how they can help out and ask them to let you know when they have been contacted and any info they think you should know.

Before offering references, you should determine what the client wants. What kind of references? What issues can a reference speak to best that will help them in coming to a decision to hire you?

Never put up a reference you haven't asked for permission and briefed on each opportunity you're using them for. Make sure you have current contact information for them and that you know when they're available (e.g., not on vacation when you need them). Only ask someone to be a reference if you intend to accept an offer from the firm. I have been used three times recently as a reference from an acquaintance, spent significant time on the calls with prospective employers for this person and then, when I let him know what a strong reference I provided, in each instance, he told me he had decided that the company wasn't a good fit and had declined the offer. Guess how likely I am to want to jump in as a reference next time! Do your due diligence before you ask someone to be a reference for you – are you serious about getting and accepting an offer from the firm you're interviewing with?

And, when you land the job, be grateful. Always follow up with a note (not just an email) with your whereabouts and acknowledging their efforts and offering to be helpful to them in some way too in the future.

No one is obliged to be a reference - either for a candidate or to share information with a candidate's prospective employer. They do this willingly, as a way to "pay it forward", so the way you treat those references says tons about you – make sure you leave the right impression and hopefully someone will pay you the compliment of allowing you to help guide their career or their firm one day, too.

Have an interesting reference story? I'd love to hear it – dpalmieri@pinnaclegroup.com