

## REFERENCE CHECKS

Reference checks are conducted to obtain an objective, honest and knowledgeable opinion on your previous job performance and suitability for the role at hand. At some stage during the job hunting process, you will be asked for referees. Reference checks are usually completed after interviews and a verbal offer, but be warned that:

- Some organisations reference-check before interview, even before they respond to your application.
- It is possible the organisation may 'cold call' your current place of work (as listed on your CV) and ask to speak to your manager. Once you send your CV, there is always a chance your privacy may be breached.
- In the private sector, if your manager learns you might be leaving (eg via an unexpected reference request), you could be let go. Government departments, on the other hand, do not take action against employees for exploring options.

### CHOOSING A REFEREE

Your referee should be able to discuss your suitability for the role:

- Check the procedure for reference checks at the organisation where you worked. In some instances, only HR is permitted to act and only to confirm your title and tenure.
- Make sure you use at least one direct manager who can speak in detail about your work - not colleagues, subordinates or senior managers to whom you have not reported directly (eg CEO).
- Do not use personal referees.
- You may be able to use a company outsider (eg stakeholder or customer) but only where relevant (eg in sales) and in addition to a direct manager.
- Most prospective (non-government) employers understand you may prefer not to use your current manager for fear of informing them of your intention to leave until such time as an offer is confirmed.

- In the private sector, listing your current manager can raise suspicions you have agreed to leave and your manager is supportive. Why else would a manager risk his or her employment to lose a star performer?
- Is there a former, temporary or acting manager to whom you reported that you could use?
- If you are confident you will have a glowing report from your current manager, explain the situation to the prospective employer and ask if you can accept the offer subject to positive reference checks. That way, you will have secured the position as far as you can before revealing your intentions to your current employer.

### STANDARD REFERENCE QUESTIONS

The usual questions your referee will be asked are:

- What is your relationship with [the candidate]?
- Can you please confirm when [he/she] joined?
- What was [his/her] position there?
- What were [his/her] responsibilities?
- How did [he/she] perform?
- Why did [he/she] leave or why do you think [he/she] would be considering leaving?
- What are [his/her] main strengths?
- What areas do you think that [he/she] needs to improve in or develop further?
- How would you evaluate [his/her] ability to communicate in writing and verbally for a variety of audiences?
- How well does [he/she] operate at different levels of the organisation?
- Can you give me your appraisal of [his/her] level of technical knowledge/professional expertise?
- How does [he/she] perform under pressure?

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- How would you describe [his/her] work values including flexibility, punctuality, reliability and absenteeism? Were there any specific issues that affected [his/her] work performance?
- As a manager, what would you advise to maximise [his/her] effectiveness?
- Would you have any hesitations in hiring [him/her] again?

### INITIATING THE DISCUSSION

Approach potential referees when you are first considering applying for new roles. It is hard enough securing interviews without losing the opportunity through poor reference checks.

You can't control what a referee says but you can choose who you use. You should test potential referees by asking what they propose to say, in particular, on why you left or are leaving and your weakness(es). You need to accept their views but you can choose whether to use them as a referee.

*Reason for leaving:* Usually this is explained simply, but if you were terminated, bullied, medically retired etc, you need to know what the referee will say. You may be able to discuss your ideal answer with them. Perhaps he or she will support you (or say less). If you don't agree with that view, use another referee.

*Areas for improvement:* Knowing what the referee will say is enlightening and helpful. You will demonstrate a high level of self-awareness if, during your interview, you describe your weakness in a similar way to your referee. If you can't avoid using that referee, you may even consider pre-empting anything negative.

### PREPARING FOR A REFERENCE CHECK

Speak with your referees first so they are prepared and you are confident they are in your corner. Advise your referee/s that you will try to give them notice, but that some organisations may call unannounced. Some checks may even be conducted online via a survey.

Where you are advised in advance that reference checks will be conducted, email your referees your CV and a brief description of the role.

If your referee is abroad, and a phone call will be difficult, see if he or she would be willing to email responses to the organisation's template. Don't lose the opportunity to use a great referee just because he or she is overseas.

### IF ASKED TO BE A REFEREE

You may be asked to referee for someone else. If you are still employed by the same organisation, check with HR if it is acceptable for you to do so.

Ask for details on the role before committing. You might be able to emphasise positive traits that will suit the new role even if the person's performance in your organisation was less than satisfactory.

Avoid putting reference checks in writing if you can, particularly if they are negative. If the candidate is unsuccessful, you might get the blame. Most organisations are subject to the *Privacy Act* and will therefore advise that the reference check may be viewed by the subject. You will be asked for your consent to proceed.

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