

Reference Checks – Worthwhile or Waste?

Checking references always has been and always will be an important step in the hiring process. That said, it is just one step. Have I ever learned anything positive that I didn't already know about a candidate from a formal reference? Not often. Have I ever learned anything negative that I didn't already know from a formal reference? Well, here again the answer is not often.

So, why do we check references? The easy answer is that it is a formal step in our process and we just do. The more thought out answer is that although reference checking isn't the be-all end-all make-or-break step in the search process, it *is* a valuable tool – but only when approached correctly.

Reference checking needs to be approached with several goals in mind: 1) Validate both positive and negative general impressions gained through the interview process, 2) Uphold or overturn specific concerns about a candidate, and 3) Discover strengths or weakness that may have been overlooked in the interview process.

How does one accomplish these goals? By being prepared and being thorough. When conducting a reference check – whether from a search firm's perspective or from a potential employer's perspective – the first step is to do your homework. Review the person's resume one more time. Review any notes made during earlier discussions. Make a list of any specific questions or lingering concerns anyone on the interview team may have about the candidate. Formulate some questions that will help address those concerns. Make sure going into the conversation that the reference has the time to speak *freely* about the candidate. A thorough reference check is not a 5-minute process. Be prepared to arrange a better time to call the reference back in order to ensure that ample time (30-45 minutes) will be available. If references feel rushed, they're sure to avoid expanding on issues that could be of great interest – indeed critical to evaluating a candidate for a given role.

The second important element to a successful reference check is being thorough. Once the groundwork has been laid it's time to make the call. Being thorough during the call is not a matter of being sure to ask all 20 questions in order, it's a matter of making sure the questions get answered. Drill down. Push. Ask probing follow up questions. If for example, one recurring concern with the interview team is a candidate's proficiency in a certain technical area, ask the reference to talk about the candidate's skills in that area. If a general answer like, "Oh, she's great!" is given, follow up with, "Wow, so what would warrant such high praise?" and "How long has she been doing it?" and "What's the most difficult project she faced where her skills in that area were really tested?" and "What was the end result of that project?" Formal reference checking can be a valuable exercise if preparation is done before hand and the approach is thorough.

Good formal reference checking, however, should only be the beginning. An equally – or perhaps more valuable – source of information is the informal reference checking process. A good search firm working on a retained basis should be networking through

hundreds upon hundreds of individuals in a given industry segment in the course of a search. More often than not the finalist has been mentioned by name by numerous people in the course of doing the search. Whenever a good recruiter is referred to an individual, this opportunity to probe into that individual's background is to be seized upon. A search firm should track those 'hits' and speak with the candidate later about contacting those individuals in a more formal manner as well. These people are usually in a position to give candid information – often very revealing and very positive – about the candidate in question.

Formal reference checks? A worthwhile resource. Informal reference checks? An invaluable tool. While formal references often help to accomplish the first two goals of validating general impressions and addressing specific concerns, they often leave something to be desired when it comes to discovering strengths or weaknesses that may have been missed during the interview process. Informal reference checks are much more likely to help reveal potential chinks in the armor *before* the candidate joins the team.

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