



Checking References

The Spencer Group Client Toolkit



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Specialist Recruitment Solutions

Checking The References Of Applicants.

Most applicants for a position will include either written references with their resume or include names and contact details for verbal referees. It is often beneficial if a verbal reference check is conducted to accumulate and verify information about the applicant in terms of their personal characteristics, skills, experience and work ethic. So, how do you conduct a reference check to obtain the information you need to know? And how can you ensure the correctness of this information? These questions, and more, will be answered soon.

When Do You Conduct Reference Checks?

Reference checks can be performed prior to short listing or after the employer has performed the applicant's interview. One way is not better than the other: it depends on whether the information is required for accumulating or verifying information. The latter is less time-consuming as it is only performed for those applicants who are suitable for the position and is a handy method of verifying information provided by the applicant during the interview. If a reference check is performed to assist short listing, the process is obviously more time-consuming and also needs to be performed for every applicant to ensure validity and equity of the short listing process.

Reference Etiquette

Whether the reference check is performed prior to or after the interview, there is some general etiquette involved:

- When you call, introduce yourself to the referee and explain that they have been listed as a referee for the applicant.
- Ask them if it is convenient to talk and whether they are willing to participate in the reference check.
- Provide them with a brief verbal description of the position the applicant has applied for. This will assist the referee with providing relevant information about the applicant.
- After completing the reference check, thank the referee for their time.

Increasing Reference Reliability

There is much debate as to the reliability of written references and verbal referees because applicants will usually only include people as referees who will describe the applicant's attributes, skills and personal characteristics in glowing terms. Additionally, people listed as referees feel obliged to say only positive things about the applicant. How do you overcome this?

The answer is simple:

- Prepare questions before conducting the reference check.
- Ask some 'open' questions that require more than a 'yes/no' answer.
- Be prepared to ask the difficult questions (such as: Was _____ always punctual?) and clarify information that is being provided.

Some Questions To Ask ...

Following are some suggested questions that you may consider the next time you complete a reference check. Note that there is a combination of open and closed questions. Some questions also verify information while others obtain information.

- (Applicant's name) resume says that he/she worked at (previous employer's name) from (date) to (date). Is this correct?
- (Applicant's name) resume says they were responsible for (list duties). Is this correct? Were they responsible for any additional duties?
- How would you rate (applicant's name) knowledge and performance of the job?
- How much supervision did (applicant's name) require?
- How efficiently and fast was (applicant's name) able to work?
- How would you describe (applicant's name) ability to work in a team?
- Describe if (applicant's name) showed initiative and problem solving abilities on the job.
- How would you describe (applicant's name) relationship with supervisors and peers?
- Was (applicant's name) always punctual?
- Did (applicant's name) have a good attendance record?
- How do you think (applicant's name) will perform in the position applied for?
- What areas of difficulty do you think (applicant's name) will encounter in the position?
- Would you re-employ (applicant's name)? If no, why not?

This is by no means a finite list of questions you could ask. The questions are also phrased quite generally, however, provide a basis for tailoring more industry- or occupation-specific questions.

'Employment' References Are Best...

The questions also assume you are performing a reference check with a previous employer or supervisor. This type of 'employment' information is always more beneficial than just obtaining personal information. If the applicant does not list any referees of this nature, it may be beneficial to contact previous employers or supervisors seeking information about the applicant's history and performance of working with them. Please do not contact an employer who the applicant may be currently working for: it can create a difficult situation if the current employer is not aware the applicant is looking for other work!

As with all other aspects of hiring employees, the information obtained from reference checks should be accurate and kept confidential. It is also recommended that notes are free from terms of bias or discriminatory language, are as objective as possible and relevant to the job applied for. After all, if an unsuccessful applicant pursues a claim of discrimination in applying for a position, third parties, including the applicant, have access to this information.

As shown above, reference checks can become a valuable part of the recruitment process. If you require additional information on conducting reference checks, please contact a consultant at The Spencer Group.