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References Are Key to Job Search Success

By **Elisa F. Topper**

Editor's Note: We welcome Elisa as one of newest regular feature writers.

A mistake that job seekers make unknowingly is not selecting the best people to serve as their references. Countless articles have been written on resume writing, interviewing and the entire job search process, but few on how to use references to your best advantage. Once candidates have been narrowed down in the search process, often the references may be the deciding factor when candidates are equal in their qualifications.

I can personally remember screening resumes for a position only to discover that the candidate had listed their mother as a reference! No, it was not an intentional strategy to get my attention. The person just did not know that this was not acceptable in the job search process.

The following guidelines will assist you in using references appropriately.

Selecting your references

Be careful to select people that will speak positively about you in work related terms. Past employers and in some cases current employers (depends on your relationship with supervisors and staff members) are appropriate references. They will be able to talk about your work performance and ability to work with others in a positive manner. Other people to consider for references are faculty members from your academic institutions especially if you are just starting your first job search. For seasoned professionals, consider asking a professional colleague to serve as a reference. Stay away from people that only know you in a social setting. Try to select references that have titles of authority and be sure to list their relationship to you when you list them. **Be sure at this time to verify their name, title, company, phone number and email address.**

Questions often asked of references

Questions asked of references usually are about promptness, work ethic, ability to work with others, attitude, strengths, weaknesses and competencies. They will probably be asked the ultimate question; "If given the opportunity, would you hire this person again?" According to the 2004 Reference and Background Checking Survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), nearly 40% of HR professionals report that the time spent on reference checking has increased over previous years. Almost all organizations (96%) conduct some type of check on potential employees, with 50% reporting inaccuracies in information provided.

Legal issues

Know that some employers have strict rules as to what can be said about former employees. They may confirm the position and dates of employment but can not say anything more. This stems from lawsuits that have occurred due to negative statements by employers. The way to get around this is to have your reference serve as an informal reference and not speak as a company representative.

Obtaining permission

When I was the Assistant Dean of a graduate library program, I served as a reference for a number of students and continue to do so for them to this day. What really irritates me is to receive a call for a reference and have no idea an

individual has listed me as such, nor am I aware what position for which they are under consideration. I will provide a reference but it won't be as comprehensive as it could be if I had the person's resume and job description before me so that I could be prepared. In the long run, this hurts the candidate rather than helps them. **Do not forget to ask permission to use a person as a reference.**

Where to list references

Do not list them on the actual resume or list "references furnished upon request." This is no longer necessary. If the employer requests references then they should be listed on a separate page.

When to give references to employers

Give references to employers when they ask for them. Usually this is well into the interviewing process. I do recall, however, one situation when the applicant's references were called before being brought in for the interview. **Always proof the materials that you give to an employer.**

Preparing your references

Even before an employer has asked you for references, you should have your references prepared for a call. Make sure the reference has an updated resume, job description of position applied for, or a list if you are applying for several positions. They will be asked to tell the employer how long they have known you and in what job capacity. Employers are always looking for employees that will work well as part of a team and are flexible. Keep in touch with your references to inform them of your progress. Email is always a quick method of communicating. As soon as you know the name of the person that may be calling, inform your reference **immediately**. Also ask them to contact you once they have been called to give you feedback on the call.

Thanking them

Always thank your references when they have provided information to an employer and do so in writing. Should you get the job as a result of a person's reference, a gift certificate to their favorite store or restaurant is an acceptable token of appreciation.

Elisa F. Topper is Director, Dundee Township Public Library District, and the creator of the American Libraries column, "Working Knowledge." She is a frequent speaker on career and workplace issues. See her panel presentation at the ALA Conference in New Orleans at the NMRT program on Saturday, June 24, 2006.

We would love to have your feedback on this article!

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