

Chapter 9: Dealing With References

Care and Feeding of Your References

At some point in your job search you will be asked to give the prospective employer the names of references. This request usually comes after several interviews and is an indication that you are a serious candidate for the job. Thus one of your most important tasks as a job seeker is to select your references. These are individuals who are familiar with your work and are willing to be contacted by potential employers. Select three to seven people, including your former supervisor or manager. Many companies will request that you include peers and subordinates as well. The important thing is to choose people easily located by phone who will say good things about your work. Your references do not have to be currently employed by the company you worked for. They may in fact have been laid off, or they may have retired or moved to another company.



Very rarely does anyone get a bad or negative commentary from an employment reference. However, too often the reference is bland, not very substantive, and unconvincing, or doesn't address the necessary issues. Due to our litigious society, most companies only allow their HR

departments to provide title and length of service. It is becoming increasingly difficult for potential employers to obtain substantive reference information because of these very cautious guidelines

Everybody's Doing It

Most companies today are checking references for job candidates to screen applicants, verify information that they have received during the interview process, and to find information that they haven't gotten from you directly. Potential employers are interested in knowing how you tackle new assignments, how you relate to others, where you have made significant contributions, and whether your skills are at the level required for the new position. They also want to try to find out if you'll fit in there. If the recruiter is not confident in his ability to judge your technical skills, he may ask to check your references even before you meet the hiring manager. Executive recruiters often like to thoroughly check your references before giving your resume to a prospective company. The problem with this early reference check trend is that your references will get mighty tired of saying how great you were. So you will need to plan for this by having many references and by negotiating with people regarding at what point in the job search the recruiter will check them. Obviously, references are a very

important part of your job search preparation.

Suggested Steps For Preparing References Effectively

With planning and preparation you can ensure that your references will be positive, relevant, and helpful. The following steps will serve as guidelines:

Identify several individuals who might be willing to give you good references; most of the time you will be asked to supply three names as personal references. In addition to contacting a former boss who thought highly of your work, consider contacting a peer who worked closely with you, or higher level boss who knows your work well. If your recent boss proves to be unable to speak well of you, try going back to an earlier boss, but avoid ancient references.

Select the most suitable reference for the specific job situation. By the time you are asked for references, you should know something about the job, the company, and the individuals with whom you will interact. If you have a variety of people on your reference list, you can try to match reference to situation. For example, if the company with which you are interviewing is a marketing company you might want to use a V.P of Marketing as one of your references. If it is a bank that is interviewing you, the CFO of your former employer among your three references would be useful.

1. Call Them...

Once you have identified whom you would like to have speak for you, the

next very important step is to call them on the phone and ask their permission to offer their name as a reference.

During this call let them know what you have been doing professionally since you last worked with them, and what kind of job you hope to get. Guide them in their thoughts about how they will describe your work, your working style and how you relate to others in the work place. You may want them to emphasize one or more parts of your history with this particular company. Your references will appreciate guidance in this process as they will want to help you by describing you in a positive way to a prospective employer.

2. Send Them...

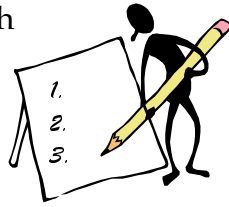
After talking with a potential reference on the phone, send him/her a copy of your resume and a brief note outlining what you had agreed that the person would say when contacted. Thank them for their co-operation and willingness to assist you in your job search.

Use the worksheet provided in **Appendix 8** to take notes and develop an outline for your letter to your reference.



3. Organize Them...

Once you have called each reference, you will want to type up a single sheet with the names, addresses, telephone numbers and brief descriptions of their relationships to you. Take the reference list with you to each interview. At the end of the interview the company representative will ask you for your list if she is interested in continuing the interview process. Do not offer references unless asked.



Do not mail your references with your resume. Recommendation or reference letters from former managers are sometimes useful, but they are not valued as much as a personal phone contact. People occasionally ask references for the names of one or two others they might speak with about your qualifications. To address this, you might think about who you would want as back ups to the top three or four, and put those names in place.

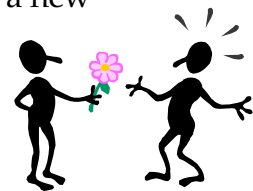
4. Tell Them...

Once an interested employer has asked for your references, you know he is interested in verifying the information that you presented and obtaining a recommendation concerning your ability to succeed in this new position. This is the time to give your list to the company so it can call your references if it chooses. Be sure to have your references listed in order of importance to you, as they may not try to contact each one.

After you leave the interview, contact each of your references to let them know that they are about to be called by XYZ company. Give them some information about the position and your feeling for the requirements so they can emphasize the appropriate skills that will complete the sale for you. Give them the name and title of the person who will be calling. Tell them why you are interested in the job, how it matches your specifications. Thank them for their support, and ask them to let you know if the company calls.

5. Thank Them...

Once you have landed a new position, it is a very good practice to let all the people who helped you along the way know about your new position. This is especially true for your references. They have invested time and energy in your success and they are curious as to the outcome of your search. They are prime network contacts in the beginning of your search and you want to give them favored treatment at the end.



Follow up telling them immediately of your success by phone or email. Either way, make sure they are the first ones to know about your new company. This is also the time to offer to keep in touch and help them in any way you can in the future. This practice will make you an active networker and cement business relationships with people who have been important to you.

The Reference Statement

To minimize confusion and ensure consistency, we often suggest that you take the initiative to write out a reference letter (or statement) for your references to use. The reference statement lays out specifically what you would like them to say regarding your strengths and qualifications for a particular job. A reference statement should be a very positive statement reflecting your suitability for a position. Many people will be pleased that you have saved them some time and you now have the opportunity to say exactly what you want. Remember to be clear, positive, and credible. If the reference wants to change anything you have written, get agreement on what she will write.



Review the reference statement draft with each reference. Again, it is better to do this in person, especially with any of your bosses whom you intend to use as a personal reference.

In Appendix 8 is a convenient worksheet you can use to complete a Reference List.



Content Guidelines for the Reference Statement

Most reference statements include the following elements:

RELATIONSHIP: Describes how and for what length of time the person has known you. “I have worked with Joe for seven years, serving as his boss for three of those years.”

STRENGTHS: These should relate to the job you are seeking. Be sure to include several of your most relevant accomplishments. Personal traits may also be mentioned: “Joe’s strongest points are that he performs the job with accuracy; is always on schedule; gets along well with superiors, peers, and subordinates; and is a creative problem solver.”

WEAKNESSES: Mentions one weakness that could be a strength taken to extreme. “Joe will sometimes become impatient with himself because he is such a perfectionist in his work.” Make sure this is consistent with the weakness you identify in the interview.

THE STORY: Briefly discusses why you are presently looking for a job. “Joe is seeking other employment because the division in which he worked was closed down.”

GENERAL RECOMMENDATION: This summarizes the recommendation that this person would make for you. “I highly recommend Joe for a management position within your company. I know him to be a good leader and feel that because of the caliber of work he performed for me, he would be a fine asset to your company.”

Timing and Follow up Suggestions

It will be clear to you during the interview process at what point you become a serious candidate; your potential employer will ask for your references. We suggest that you keep the following in mind:

- Don't offer references until asked, or until negotiations seem to be approaching the finish line. If your search is long, review your reference statement periodically for updates.
- Thank your reference after each call and try to get feedback.
- Inform your references when you get a new job and send them your new business cards.

The following are some important details to remember when dealing with references:



1. Always bring a list of references to an interview to present after the interview is complete. The employer will generally ask if he is interested in your references.
2. Be sure to have your complete name, address, and phone at the top of your Reference List.
3. Use the heading, *Professional References* or *Personal References* if you have both professional and personal references.
4. Only use a personal reference if you have fewer than three professional references, or if your personal reference is well known or has an impressive title.
5. List your references in order of importance, usually starting with your former supervisor.
6. Include a minimum of three references, preferably four or five.
7. Use no more than one page.
8. Do not include any references on your list that you have not recently contacted.
9. If one of your references has changed companies since you worked together, list her current company in parentheses under or next to her name insert information about her former position.
10. Do not include your references when you give out or mail your resume.
11. Never ask your references for a job, but remember your references can serve as strategic job networking sources.