

Employment References

Most people don't give much thought about references until after a potential employer asks for them. After all, searching for a job is very time consuming and doesn't give you much of a chance to think about anything except getting interviews. But reference checks are a very important part of the job search process: both for job seekers and for employers. For employers, references are a chance to add depth to the information they have learned about you from the interview and from your resume.

At a minimum, your references should confirm the information the employer has about you and that you are a competent employee. However, you should strive to provide references who can be as enthusiastic about you and you would be about yourself. A great reference makes the hiring manager feel good about their decision to hire you and sets a positive tone for your first few days on the job. As the saying goes, you only get one chance to make a first impression and your references can help you do that.

Getting Your Ducks In Order

It's a good idea to get a reference letter from your manager as soon after leaving a position as possible. Getting a reference letter right away makes it easier for your manager to recall specific contributions you made to the team. Even if you don't end up needing a reference right away, having the reference letter provides you with something to fall back on in the event you are unable to contact your former manager at a later time. Plus, if you decide to go back to the manager a year or more later to ask them to provide a phone reference, you can remind them about the reference letter they wrote for you.

Before asking someone to take the time to write a reference letter or provide a phone reference, it's a good idea to get a feel for what they would say about you. One way to do this is to say "Do you feel you know me well enough to write a good reference letter?" instead of just "Could you write a reference letter?" This way, if the person doesn't feel they could say something positive, they have an easy way to decline your request.

Employers who ask for references want to confirm dates of employment and position titles at a minimum. They will also try to find out if your former boss would rehire you given the opportunity. And many employers will ask the reference to grade your abilities in the specific areas that will apply to your new job. For example, if you're applying for a job as a manager, the employer may ask your reference to rate your managerial skills on a scale from 1 to 10. Having a sense of the types of questions employers are likely to ask your references, you should try to gauge the potential reference's response to these questions before deciding to let them vouch for you. For example, you could say "I'm curious - if you had the chance, would you hire me again to work for you?"

Using Non-Employer References

If you don't have a lot of good references from former employers, non-employer references can be helpful too. Generally, a potential employer will want at least two references from former employers. But if they require three references, you may be able to provide two from former employers and one from someone else. Professors, former co-workers and customers can all be good references if they know you well. If you have a choice between providing three lukewarm references from former employers or two lukewarm references from former employers plus one glowing reference from someone you didn't work for, the latter is probably the better choice. A survey done by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) found more than eight out of ten human resource professionals regularly check references, so don't count on an employer not contacting a lukewarm or bad reference.

Legal Issues

There are a lot of misconceptions about the legal issues surrounding reference checks. Some job seekers mistakenly believe that former employers can only provide dates of employment, position titles and salary history. Even though many companies have established regulations specifying that managers are only to confirm dates of employment, position and salary history, many managers are either unaware of these regulations or simply ignore them. Legally, an employer can provide as much information as they want about your tenure with their organization.

As long as a former employer does not knowingly provide false information in a reference check, it is fair game. An employer can legally say or write negative things about you if they are just opinions. For example, the employer could say "John was a horrible manager." What is not legal would be for an employer to knowingly provide false information. For example, if a former manager didn't like you, they could not say "John started a fire in our office building that caused thousands of dollars in damage" if it was not true.