

Checking References

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My columns typically encourage building future leaders within your organization. Every organization, however, will also have to bring new team members in from the outside.

One of the advantages of building future leaders within your own organization is that you have clear knowledge of their values. When you hire from the outside, you are always taking a risk. Just as a virus can infect your computer, you can bring into your organization someone with unacceptable standards who could potentially consume huge time and generate large problems.

I advise my clients to insist on references from applicants. More importantly, I advise that they discipline themselves to make the calls necessary to check with at least three of the references for each applicant.

Sometimes clients push back by saying, "Yeah, but most employers won't give any information other than the person's dates of employment." I acknowledge that many employers, especially larger ones, have adopted that policy. But I also encourage my client to let THEM decide what they will and won't share--don't you make the choice for them. There are still many people on the other end of that phone line who, especially if you are courteous and respectful, will volunteer extremely valuable, unique perspective!

It's amazing some of the free information that references are willing to offer! Most of the time, the information learned supports the decision to hire the individual. However, occasionally there are unexpected and interesting surprises--new insights that are definitely worth additional exploration.

Here's how to go about checking with references. First, confirm with the applicant that it is acceptable to contact the references that he or she provided. Ask if there is any particular information that should be sought--or to be avoided--with any of the references. (For example, some people list the current employer as a reference, yet the applicant may prefer you not contact the existing employer!)

When I contact references, I like to have a "script" to guide my portion of the conversation. The rest of this column offers a typical script about an applicant--let's call him Joe Smith. As I ask these questions, I have a summary sheet for recording the information I learn.

"Hello, my name is Dennis Hooper, and I work for ABC Company. We are interviewing candidates for the position of Office Manager. One of our applicants, an individual named Joe Smith, has listed you as a reference. Are you willing to spend a few minutes talking with me about your experiences with Joe?" [If the answer is "no," ask the reference to explain why--and record the information offered!]

When I have permission to continue with the interview, I ask, "Would you please share with me how long you have known Joe Smith and how you came to know him?"

If the reference is a former employer, I ask, "When and for how long did Joe Smith work with you? [Pause for answers between questions.] What were the circumstances under which Joe left? If Joe were to apply to work with you again, would you consider rehiring Joe?" Whatever responses I receive, I always ask, "Would you please tell me why you said that?" That usually elicits some additional insightful information.

If Joe is a friend, I encourage the reference to tell me whatever stories he or she is willing to share. It's amazing how open such an individual will be in sharing information you can use in evaluating the applicant's values, personal relationships, and commitment to responsibilities.

If the reference is not a former employer, I ask, "Imagine you run a company and Joe Smith applied to work as a member of your team. Would you consider hiring Joe? Please explain why you said that."

“As you think of the strengths of Joe Smith, what attributes or characteristics come to mind? What are the values that you have observed in Joe, or that you know that Joe holds in high regard?”

“Please describe the abilities of Joe Smith to learn new concepts and apply them. Please describe the abilities of Joe to cooperate with other people.”

“Please describe the reliability and commitment level of Joe Smith. Is there anything that we should particularly evaluate or be sensitive to as we consider Joe for employment with our company?”

“Is there anything further I should have thought to ask you? Are there any other comments you’d like to share about Joe Smith?”

I usually close the conversation by saying, “Thank you very much for the time you have taken to speak with me and for the information you have shared.” I may even go beyond that expression of thanks if the person has stretched beyond the original boundaries of “official policy” to share what he or she would want to know if our situations were reversed!

If you contact three references for each applicant, you will significantly reduce the likelihood of hiring someone who is not trustworthy or will damage the culture you are working to enhance!

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