

Getting the Most from Your References

By Liz Ryan
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They can make or break your candidacy, so make sure you list articulate people who know you well – and will return calls promptly.

It's only a matter of time before we'll open the newspaper or log onto our favorite jobs Web site and read something like: "Wanted: V.P. of Marketing for growing software company. Qualifications must include a top-tier MBA, 10 years of experience -- and a long-term association with one of the executives in our firm."

Can you doubt it? Over the past couple of decades, networking has become central to our work lives. Having well-spoken, accomplished people who know you and the quality of your work is now a key factor in keeping your career moving forward. So a critical question is: How can you make sure your job references are as effective as they can be?

A good place to start is by keeping in mind that your references can make or break your candidacy as a job seeker. If they're hard to reach, for instance, it doesn't say good things about their support for you. So they should respond to calls or e-mail messages quickly -- within a day is ideal. When you remind them that they're going to get a phone call, ask them to take it seriously.

Conversation Starters

It's also critical to choose the right references. They should be a mix of former bosses, peers, and subordinates -- along with clients if the new job will include sales or service roles. Your references should also be from several previous employers, not all from the same one. And most of them must be reasonably recent: If your references are all from the '90s, what does that say about your ability to build relationships since then? Musty references are as big a red flag for hiring managers as an unexplained six-month gap in employment.

As you prepare your supporting cast, size up each person's relationship with you, their communication skills, and their professionalism. A hiring manager or human-resources person should come away impressed with the people who know you. If someone on your list can be coarse, abrupt, inarticulate, or goofy, cross them off. The value of your references isn't so much the names on the page as the quality of the conversations they'll have.

In the best case, the hiring manager will say to you after a reference-checking call, "Hello Jean! I just got off the phone with Allen Smith, your old boss. What a terrific guy! We had a great conversation, and he added a lot to my understanding of your strengths. Thanks for including him among your references."

Judgment Call

This assumes, of course, that the hiring company goes about its reference checks the right way. Many companies "downsource" this function to a human-resources person, who calls each reference and goes through a checklist of questions: How long did you work with this person? What was your relationship? References often find this absurd and offensive. If I'm willing to take time to stand up for a colleague, I deserve to talk to someone who doesn't need a checklist to get to the point.

Ideally, then, your references will talk with the hiring managers themselves. I recommend to hiring managers that they start off the call by learning a little bit about your reference. That will give them more perspective on you.

I also urge hiring managers to listen for more than a candidate's strengths and weaknesses. If they can elicit your reference's knowledge of the real you, they'll be able to determine if you picked an appropriate reference or simply the first name that came to mind. That will give them a measure by which to gauge your judgment.

For instance, if the calls to your references are irritating (slow call-back, limited knowledge of your recent work) your prospective boss may gather that your judgment is less than sensational. And who wants a person on their team who can't come up with good enough references to help close the deal?

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