

# Get the most out of employee reference checks

Ever wonder if you should check references before extending an employment offer to a new hire?

The answer is a resounding **YES!** If you really want to make great hires, then add reference checks to your recruitment mix. Otherwise, it's like having a loose cannon on the deck of your ship—you never really know what you're going to get.

Of course, even with reference checks, there are no guarantees. However, your goal is to make "high probability hires" by ensuring that you've crossed all your T's and dotted all your I's in the candidate selection process. Hiring simply based on an interview is a major risk.

## Reference check basics

Let's start with some facts.

1. Reference checks are **not illegal** to seek or to provide.
2. It's not true that candidates "only pick people who will say good things about them."
3. Don't assume that prior employers won't speak with you.

Here's how executive recruiters conduct reference checks. There are five simple steps that you should follow before saying "I do" to candidates.

### Step 1: What to tell candidates

Tell the candidate that you're in the process of checking references on *several finalists* for the position in question

First, this builds a sense of competition in the process. It should motivate candidates to work harder to set up referencing checking phone calls. Second, since candidates will believe that they are one of several finalists under consideration, they won't be shocked if they don't get your job offer after the reference check step has been completed.

### Step 2: Pick your references

Identify two to three former, immediate supervisors who can speak to the individual's work style, including communication, pace, ability to accept constructive criticism, self-motivation level, accountability, and the like. Those are the people you're going to want to speak with.

### Step 3: Have the candidate set things up

Have the candidate do all the legwork in terms of "reference bridging" and setting up the call.

Prior employers likely won't engage in a reference conversation with you if you're making a cold call. After all, their company may have told them that giving references violates company policy. (There is the possibility of a potential defamation claim if false information is given and a candidate doesn't get the job, after all.) In this case, the candidate touches base with the three prior supervisors and gives you their updated phone numbers so that they're expecting your call.

#### **Step 4: Get the info you need**

When opening a conversation with a past supervisor, direct the conversation to make sure you get the info you want.

"Laura, Sam said some excellent things about your leadership abilities in terms of providing him with clear structure and direction in his day, and I was hoping that you could share some insights into his ability to excel in our company. (Sure)

"Our challenge here at XYZ Company is to find someone whose personality best matches the temperament of this role. The position that Sam's applying for is very fast-paced, it requires someone who enjoys working with the public and who can sometimes tame cranky customers, and it also requires an analytical eye because there's so much detail in the follow-up compliance reports that are necessary. Did he tell you anything about the job or express interest in it at the time he asked you to speak with me?" (Yes—he said he was very excited.)

"Great! Then how does that sound as an overall fit in terms of his personality, his ability to work with the public, and his attention to detail?" (That sounds like a great match—it's very similar to what he did here with us.)

"I'm glad to hear that. Then allow me to ask you some specific questions about Sam and his ability to excel in this particular role . . ."

#### **Step 5: Get more info by diving deeper**

With the past employer's permission to proceed, line up the eight to ten questions that you feel are critical for success in the role.

#### **It's worth the time**

Speaking to two or three former supervisors may add 45 minutes to the new hire process (i.e., 15 minutes per call), but you'll be blown away by the feedback you get and wonder why you haven't been doing this up to now in your career! You'll feel more confident about your hires from day one, cut down on "probationary turnover," and become quite the headhunter yourself!