

Checking references

Companies need to manage the risk of hiring, more now than they have ever done before. Employers have a duty to hire with care and diligence. When hiring, the impact on production, culture, corporate integrity and honesty is a primary requirement.

Reference checks can be a valuable tool when selecting applicants for employment. They not only can be helpful in authenticating information provided in the resume, but also, and more importantly, in obtaining additional information about an applicant's work performance and habits, and other information not provided in the resume but relevant to the job opening.

A previous employer can be a valuable source of information regarding someone you are considering hiring. While some may refuse to provide any information, many will be happy to share their thoughts and opinions.

However, it appears that employers seem to trust what top-level candidates say about their backgrounds and don't always check them thoroughly. The higher up people are in a corporation, the less likely they are to be screened. There is almost a country-club attitude that says that where a person is being hired at a VP or C-level, it's just impolite to do background screening. Also, at a more senior level it is usual for employees to stay at a company for several years, and it seems an unapproachable task to check references on a senior director who has been employed at one company for more than a decade. If you are using a reputable recruitment consultant they should have sufficient contacts to know someone who can give a reference, even if it isn't the person named – and as a third party are able to obtain an un-biased opinion.

At Miller McKenzie it is our policy to check references but we can offer advice to organisations who wish to set up their own checking process.

Ways of Checking References

- Requesting a written response by post/e-mail – this yields basic information but may be the only feasible approach in most circumstances.
- Telephoning the applicants references – this gives the opportunity to interpret the vocal inflections of the person providing the reference.

- Meeting with the applicants references – not always a practical approach, but this will elicit the most information because the person checking the reference can interpret the facial expressions and body language of the person providing the reference.

Processing Reference Checking

- Use an application form that includes a waiver giving permission to verify information supplied by the applicant during the hiring process. The application form could also contain a statement signed by the applicant, stating that the applicant can be terminated from employment for providing false information during the hiring process.
- Assign a member of staff to verify the factual information provides by applicants as well as checking references. This staff member should be trained and capable of understanding underlying meanings and never be satisfied with 'blanket' responses such as "he was generally effective", and should inquire about specific contributions or skills.
- Supply the staff member checking references with a pre-printed form or checklist for each applicant to keep track of the information verified.
- Keep a copy of the completed form/checklist on the applicants file should there be any queries in the future.

Suggested Questions for a Reference Check

- What is your relationship with him/her?
- How many people did he/she manage?
- Was there any responsibility for management decision and policy information?
- Dates of employment.
- How did his/her results compare with others?
- Did he/she work hard?
- How was his/her attendance?
- Did he/she get along with others?
- Was there any financial or domestic difficulties that you know of that interfered with his/her work?
- What was his/her earnings when leaving your organisation?
- When did he/she leave?
- What would you say was his/her strong points?
- and weak points?
- Would you re-employ him/her if you had an opening?
- The candidate is being considered for the following position.... In your opinion is he/she qualified to do that job?
- If there anything else you could tell me that might help in forming an accurate estimate of his/her qualifications and abilities