

What are references saying about you?

Employers, recruiters and background-screening firms are checking out job candidates very thoroughly these days. More than half of companies surveyed this year say they check applicants' criminal, employment and educational histories, while nearly two-thirds contacted references. Asked how their screening programs had changed over the past three years, 64% of companies noted that requirements had been increased or enhanced.

Levels of Reference-Checking

Employers can verify employment, education, credit and criminal records as well as contact references. In America it is fashionable to outsource reference checking to companies who conduct background checks and provide reports on the applicants. In the UK we currently rely on checking employment and personal references, but it is probable that the trend will follow the American system.

Be Upfront With Employers

People who left a job on poor terms sometimes avoid disclosing the name of their prior managers. This rarely works. It's better to manage the process by explaining what happened. Recruiters understand that most executives have mismatches at some point in their careers.

If you're worried about your references, you can dilute negative issues by preparing a diversified reference list of seven to 10 names -- two to three supervisors, two to three peers, two to three subordinates, and personal references, although he may not call all of them.

If you anticipate a poor reference, take pre-emptive steps by asking the manager, perhaps at the exit interview, "When someone calls, what will you say?" Getting a letter of reference, although few prospective employers are interested in them, is wise because then your former manager has committed to a position in writing.

Conducting Your Own Check

If you are unsure about your references you can consider hiring a background firm to check your references, especially if you haven't been receiving offers. If you've had

great first interviews and can't understand why you're reaching dead ends, it's a valuable service. An alternative is to ask a trusted friend to make some calls.

Countering Negative Remarks

Determine what may be causing your lack of offers. If there's bad blood between you and an ex-boss, tell interviewers you might not receive a good reference from this person but can provide names of four other bosses who will give an un-biased opinion.

Or, you might say, "He's not my best reference because we didn't see eye to eye on some issues." Be generally positive about this manager and brief and specific about your differences. Ask the employer to also call your best references. You might say, "If you call this person, please call XYZ as well."

Be up front with the potential employer. If you lie or omit things, that'll hurt you. Talk about why you can do the new job, and explain why it was a mistake for you to have been in the last one. There's no rule that says you have the right to hide negative information.

We offer these additional tips:

- Don't delete negative experience from your resume. Most likely it will be discovered during a thorough background check, possibly after you are hired. In that case, you'll likely be dismissed.
- Keep referees in the loop. Let them know the progress of your search and prepare them for possible calls. Referees who don't know the types of jobs you're seeking won't be able to put you in the best light.
- Maintain good relationships with potential referees. Call or e-mail them periodically even when you don't need anything. It's awkward to ask someone you haven't talked with in five years for a reference.