

How a Solid Reference List Can Help You Get the Job

By Robert Half International

In today's competitive job market, those seeking employment need to do everything they can to distinguish themselves from the competition. A less-than-glowing reference can set you apart in the wrong way.

When our company asked executives to describe the most unusual reference checks they'd conducted, the responses included someone whose mom recommended her for the position and a job candidate whose reference said the applicant didn't like the industry in which she was trying to get a job.

Following are some suggestions for assembling a reference list that works for, not against, you:

Don't ambush your contacts. Make sure the people you ask potential employers to reach out to are aware that you've listed them as references and are comfortable speaking on your behalf. For example, one respondent in the survey talked to a reference who started laughing because he couldn't believe he was listed as a referral. Another reference had never heard of the job candidate he was asked to comment on. You don't want hiring managers to be greeted with these types of responses.

Before you submit a reference list to a prospective employer, provide each contact with an updated copy of your resume and describe the company and position you've applied for, as well as the name of the person who will likely be calling. Contacting references beforehand will also allow you to make sure each individual is enthusiastic about your request; those who quickly return phone calls and are excited to speak about your capabilities make the best impressions on hiring managers.

Choose wisely. Just as you would adjust your cover letter and resume for each position for which you apply, it's also a good idea to customize your list of contacts. Consider which of your references can best discuss the traits and qualities you possess that directly relate to the job. Such individuals won't necessarily possess the most impressive job titles. If you're applying for a management position, for example, it's helpful to provide contact information for a previous supervisor *and* someone you managed.

Remember, it's a small world. Some employers may go the extra mile to learn more about you, and social media sites can make such detective work easier than in the past. You should not only avoid burning bridges with former colleagues but also be selective about who's in your online network since a hiring manager could contact these individuals. Because of this reason, you may consider relying on different services for your personal and professional networks. For instance, you might use LinkedIn for business purposes and Facebook for personal ones.

Go the extra mile. Make it easy for an employer to speak to your references by providing clear contact information for each individual, including the person's name, phone number and e-mail address. You might even note the best time of day to reach him or her.

Tell the truth. One of the executives surveyed by our company spoke to a reference who said the job candidate didn't do the work he claimed to do during the interview. Another reference told an executive that the applicant didn't work for a firm she listed in her employment history. Hiring managers are bound to find out if you stretched the truth during the hiring process, so resist any temptation to be less than honest about your prior experience — and make sure your references are forthright, too.

Say thanks. Even if a reference doesn't end up speaking to a hiring manager on your behalf, thank that person and keep him or her updated on the status of your search. If you are hired, be sure to send a thank-you note or even a small gift to your references. Also remember to not let the relationships go dormant until you're on the job hunt again. Keeping in touch with your references, even after you've settled into a new job, can help you maintain a solid network of professionals who can assist you in various ways throughout your career.

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