

Reference checking

In a previous article I covered the employment offer and, as part of the recruitment process, mentioned the importance of reference checking. In this article I expand on this integral step.



JOHN HACKETT
DIRECTOR,
EVENT RECRUITMENT

As we all know, previous behaviour on the job can be a very good predictor of future performance and reference checking is an excellent tool in assessing this. At the very least it can also be used to verify that a candidate's own resume has not been creatively enhanced or misrepresented in any way, or to distinguish two candidates that are difficult to separate in terms of their suitability for a role.

Here are a few guidelines that

should help you get the most out of the reference check process:

- Aim to speak to at least two referees for each short-listed candidate and ideally target the candidate's previous two roles (their current role is usually difficult unless the candidate has confided in their manager that they are seeking a move elsewhere).
- Ensure that the referees were direct managers of the candidate in their previous roles rather than peers or managers from another part of the business.
- Ensure that the same questions are asked across each referee for all short-listed candidates so you can make direct comparisons on key issues.
- Make it clear to the referee that you are seriously considering the candidate for a role in your business and that you would like to ask a few questions to validate your perceptions of them. Ensure they have the time to speak and remind them that the discussion will be a confidential one.
- Information you should aim to collect can include:
 - The candidate's employment period
 - Their reporting relationship with the referee
 - The responsibilities of the role(s) they undertook
 - A rating of their overall performance
 - The candidate's strengths and weaknesses
 - Their major achievements on the job

- Their personal attributes including communication skills, ability to interact with others and work in a team, integrity and honesty, motivation, attitude, etc.
- Attendance, punctuality and reliability
- Their manageability and best way to get the most out of their performance
- Their own management ability (if applicable)
- Their reasons for leaving
- Whether the referee would rehire the candidate
- Any other specific issues crucial to the role they have applied to (e.g. time management skills and meeting deadlines, accuracy, ability to handle stressful situations, pressure or conflict, taking initiative on the job, etc).
- You can also describe the role they will be undertaking, if successful, and ask whether the referee believes they will be a good fit and why.

- Use open questioning techniques that make it difficult to get just a yes or no answer and don't be afraid to probe or seek further explanation if a point is not covered in enough detail. At the same time, try to keep your own perceptions of the candidate to yourself and don't let them influence your decision making if a candidate that you like receives a less than glowing reference.
- Listen to what the referee does not say, or whether they hesitate or skirt around issues as this may be an indication of a candidate's shortcoming or weakness. Also be mindful of the referee's personal style which may cause them to comment less or more enthusiastically about a candidate.

It takes time and money to train new employees in the necessary skills required to undertake their new role but employers also want to ensure that they have a candidate on board that has the desired personal style to be a good team fit as well as being aligned with the business's cultural values. All of this can be more easily achieved if we undertake a rigorous reference check process. **m**

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