



How to Find Out if Your Perfect Candidate Leaves the Toilet Seat Up

...and Other Reference-Checking Stories

Presented by:



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Why you SHOULD Check References

We mean, like, *for real* check references. Nahwhatimsayin? I'm not talking about those references that the candidate lists at the bottom of their resume. And I don't want to *necessarily* know what the candidate's BFF Charles thinks about him, either. Unless, the references at the bottom of the resume are from a previous, direct supervisor and Charles is a BFF because the candidate-in-question had such a great work ethic and doubled company profitability in like, 5 minutes, those types of references aren't considered all that relevant or useful for us in the reference-checking process.

Think about it: wouldn't it be great if we could check references before entering into a romantic relationship with someone? Seriously, how much time and tears and pints of ice cream could have been saved had we just sat down to lunch with one of our exes previous girlfriends or wives? Petition to create an ex-boyfriend/husband/girlfriend/wife referral or reference app! Although *THAT* topic is a subject for another time, there is a key point here that we want to emphasize. Please read on.

We check reviews on product and service sites like Amazon and Yelp, right? Why shouldn't the same idea apply for reference checking candidates? Employers want to know what they're "getting into" with a candidate, how well they work, and if there is a return policy (also known as "at-will" employment), and rightly so. Reference checks are like customer reviews. Not everyone has something nice to say, but if the candidate did a great job and is considered a pretty decent person, the reference will likely be a positive one. *And don't forget*, candidates are checking your references before they even apply for your job most times, on sites like [Glassdoor](#) and [Indeed](#), so why can't you/we/us check theirs, too?

Perhaps the reference question is taboo because so many companies have a policy against providing a reference of any substance. Maybe they're afraid(?), feel uncomfortable(?), or otherwise feel hypocritical(?) when asking to check a candidate's references...maybe it's all three reasons?

We think it's time to DISRUPT the notion that reference checks should be taboo. We jump all over candidate and employee referrals like they're the best thing since [The Snuggie](#), shouldn't we then also hold a direct supervisor's referral or opinion of their employee's services in high regard?

This eBook is dedicated to the hiring managers, recruiters, and HR experts who believe the reference hype and don't press harder to get one. We wrote this for you in hopes of shedding some light on a controversial topic that will ultimately teach you how to get a reference from a candidate and cut through all of the objections mentioned previously.

Why You DON'T Check References

We're not trying to dismiss the fact that most companies do, in fact, conduct some kind of reference checking. We are saying that this process should be systematic and deliberate every single time. Instead of simply verifying dates of employment and eligibility for rehire, we really want to know more information about the candidate that will help us understand if they are a good fit for our job.

According to the [EEOC](#), employment law states that, "it is illegal for an employer to give a negative or false employment reference (or refuse to give a reference) because of a person's race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information." This doesn't even say that we're *not* allowed to give a more in-depth reference speaking to the candidate's abilities and work habits, beyond dates of employment and rehire status.

Why then are we so afraid to do so, especially in a world of reviews, referrals, and opinions? According to an employment law [article](#) regarding privileges for job references, Judge Trial Referee Justice David Borden states,

"We believe that the integrity of employment references not only is essential to prospective employers, but also to prospective employees, who stand to benefit from the credibility of positive recommendations...It also would encourage a "culture of silence" not to afford a qualified privilege to employment references that are made in good faith and without improper motive."

Despite the practicality and helpfulness of a positive reference, we understand that there are valid reasons why a thorough and more in-depth reference-checking process doesn't occur very often. That's what we're going to explore here further.

Hypocrisy

You know how when you're going to hire someone and you ask them to provide 3 references that can speak to their competency and work ethics, and indicate that direct supervisors are preferred? And then how when someone calls you asking about a former employee, and they keep prying to find out more information? You feel stuck. You're torn. You fired

that last gal because she was an HR nightmare, causing drama and harassing every other worker in site, and now you are faced with providing a reference to someone for her. You don't want to get sued or in any type of legal confrontation, so you're strict with providing only the bare minimum, but this guy won't stop pressing you for details on your personal recommendation. What do you do?

Even though you require references from your own candidates, doesn't this feel a bit hypocritical? It should. Because it is! We get it.



Fear

Fear plays a part as well. We might not want to find out if our so-far perfect candidate is really a serial killer, or was in their last position anyway. When you really click with a candidate and everything seems to be

- Great employees leave a good reputation behind
- Managers like good employees
- Managers want to help good employees do well
- Managers may provide an "off the record" personal reference

If an employee is so great and would be an asset to any company, why would a supervisor let a policy stop them from shouting from the rooftops that their previous employee was the best? Just like when you eat at a fantastic restaurant. You can barely leave the place before leaving a raving review on Yelp, because you want to contribute to the success of the business.

falling into place, it's difficult to accept any news to the contrary. What if the reference is a poor one? How will you incorporate this feedback into your

already rosy perception of this person? Even more difficult is when you've been working a job for months with little activity and finally find THE PERFECT CANDIDATE! Yea, we know. Been there!

Uncomfortable

It kind of sucks calling someone cold and asking them about someone else. You don't want to impose or bother the person, and you're

like, asking them all these questions like you deserve to know the answers...so awkward, right?!

This is why it's the most genius idea ever to have your candidates set up the actual reference check with their former supervisor. THIS WAY, it's not as awkward for you. It's more like, "hey you, we have a mutual connection in common and he said to call you" and they're like, "oh yea, hey what's up, nice to hear from you," and then it's all good. You can easily and casually move into conducting the reference check at that point.

If your candidate doesn't set it up on their own, that's okay too, you'll just have to do a little more relationship building in the beginning of the call. Building rapport is a huge component to a quality reference check. When you can shoot the sh*t with your reference for a bit before diving right into what they can do for you, you bring down the barriers of awkwardness and unfamiliarity, hopefully connecting over shared interests or some other item of small talk.

Building this relationship will allow you to ask those tough questions of the reference, point blank. It's much easier to say, "was Jim really an asset with creative ideas or not?" when you've established some kind of relationship with the reference beforehand.

If you prefer to streamline the process even further, consider utilizing a tool like [Reference Hunter](#) that will help you automate the checking of references. Learn more about it [here](#).

Excuses, and The Dog That Ate My Homework

"He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else."

— Benjamin Franklin

Excuses come in many shapes and sizes. When confronted with the threat of a reference check, candidates who have something to hide will come up with anything they can that sounds reasonable to avoid offering a reference. Here are some of the most popular ones we encounter when interviewing:

"It's Against Company Policy"

This is probably the most common objection to getting a reference, and rightly so, as there are legal ramifications and challenges that plague the HR policies set up to address references. These policies were made to protect companies from litigation and protect employees from slander and opportunity in finding other employment.

Time and time again, a candidate will offer a reason why they can't get a reference, starting at the corporate level. Something out of the candidate's control, such as "it's against company policy," which seems to eliminate the candidate being at fault or responsible in any way. Zero liability.

Our Argument Against It:

While it may very well be against company policy to provide a reference, our theory is that a good candidate should and probably will be able to get one anyway. Here's the logic:

If you're working with a wonderful employee and person, wouldn't you want to see them continue to do well? Wouldn't you want to take part in that if you could offer a word for them, if even a personal recommendation? Even [Liz Ryan](#), the maven of HR agrees! If an employee refuses to provide a reference or comes up with several reasons why they wouldn't be able to get a good word, even if it's personal and unofficial, there's likely another reason behind their motives.



“We had Moral or Ethical Differences”

This one is so amazing. Another great reason why a candidate can't (or won't) get a reference is something along the lines of “differences with the management style” or “ethical and moral differences” between management and the candidate. I place these responses in quotes and use a sarcastic tone not because these can't be very valid and legitimate reasons 1-2% of the time. That 98-99% of the time though, they're complete BS.

Now, again, I will preface this with the fact that I recognize there are some cases where an employer engages in unethical or immoral behavior, and as an employee, this might cause you to pause and reconsider whether this company is something to stick with. I get it. These cases are few and far between and should be handled especially carefully.

For the circumstances where this is not the case, and really “we had moral or ethical differences” means “my performance or attitude sucks and I was fired,” the candidate is attempting to cover up the fact that they can't get a positive reference and so *of course* wants you to avoid speaking with their supervisor. This is no reason to not speak with the person, and if anything, will allow you to weigh the candidate's responses with the supervisors. If the candidate flat out refuses to provide a direct reference, it is a major red flag and should be addressed as such.



Our Argument Against It:

What does this even mean? People have disagreed with other people for decades. Centuries even. Countries disagree with other countries and political parties with each other, and so on. This doesn't mean we don't get on with it and move forward. Looking at it from a bigger picture perspective, this candidate is essentially telling you “I can't get past our differences enough to provide a reference who can speak to my achievements.”

What this likely means is that, “I don’t like my boss and he doesn’t like me and I’m afraid he’ll say something that won’t sound good or make me look bad.” As Anne Fisher, a contributing writer for Fortune [puts it](#), it’s always best if the candidate just speaks up honestly about the situation.

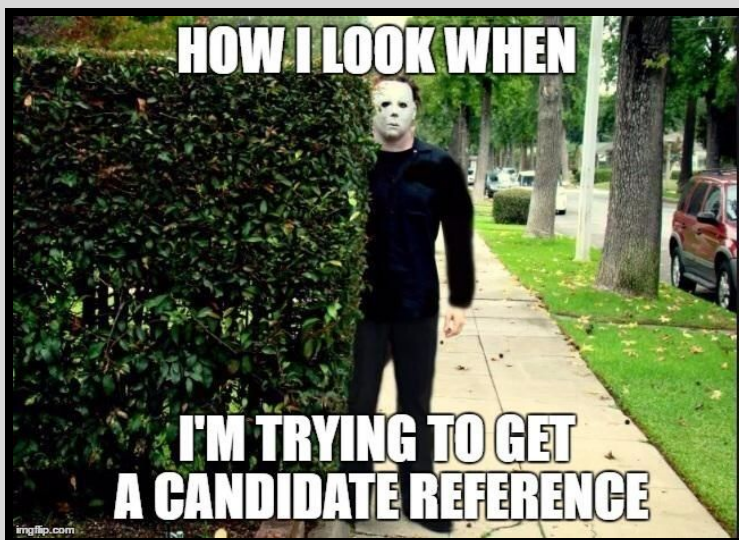
“No Longer with the Company”

Let’s not forget when a candidate can’t get a reference because their supervisor or manager is no longer with the company. That’s always a good one. Even though you didn’t ask what the previous bosses life circumstances look like, the candidate feels it’s important to update you on the career trajectory of their previous supervisor. So thoughtful!



Our Argument Against It:

Chances are, if we’re bothering to ask for a reference from your previous supervisor or company, it’s because that position was a substantial part of your career. Chances are, if that position was a substantial part of your career, then you are either in contact with your supervisor, a current or former colleague, have Google or some other



means of using technology, and can likely figure out a way to find this person and their contact information. Whether they’re still with the company is irrelevant; the fact they were a supervisor is what matters.

We just really want to know if they would provide a reference and what they would say, AND, if we’re planning to hire you I want you to know *WE ARE GOING TO*

TALK TO THIS PERSON, so whether they are with the company or retired on a yacht in Bermuda matters very little to me. As long as I can get the reference...

There are so many ways to avoid getting a reference, but if you know how to identify them and work to overcome the objections, you're sure to get one every time.



What Do You Say to the Pope?

Once you've successfully obtained a reference from your candidate, you have to actually call and verify them as a reference. For a complete list of questions to ask, check out our article on the topic [here!](#) There are several ways to go about setting this up, which includes:

- Having your candidate coordinate communication with the reference, letting them know you'll be in touch for a reference check
- Having your candidate schedule a call and confirm an appointment time between both parties (ideal)
- Utilizing an automated reference-check tool, such as [Reference Hunter](#)

Encouraging your candidate to be a part of this process also lends insight into their level of engagement and motivation to help make this a smooth transition.

When you are on the phone with the reference, follow this format:

Build Rapport

Building rapport is an important part of any reference-checking process. During this stage you will be reassuring them that everything you discuss is confidential and will not be shared with the candidate.

Validate the Reference

You want to gather some information about who you're speaking with, including the reference's name, proper spelling and pronunciation, and their title or position. Then you might ask them a bit about what they do within the company to learn about their position more.

The goal is to understand and verify that this person is truly in a position to be considered a good reference and isn't just the candidate's buddy or colleague. Bob Nicoson, VP and chief HR officer at Constant Contact, suggests that social media helps play a part in understanding how valid references are, as it's easy to check a site such as LinkedIn and verify contact within the candidate's company. Direct supervisors and managers are the best type of reference because they can speak to the true abilities and competencies of a candidate in a work environment that is similar or likely to demand the same kind of abilities as their previous role. This allows you, as the new employer, to gauge whether the candidate will be able to "cut it" in your organization.

You might want to include here a bit about your company, the position you are considering this candidate for, and any other aspects of your business the reference may find useful.

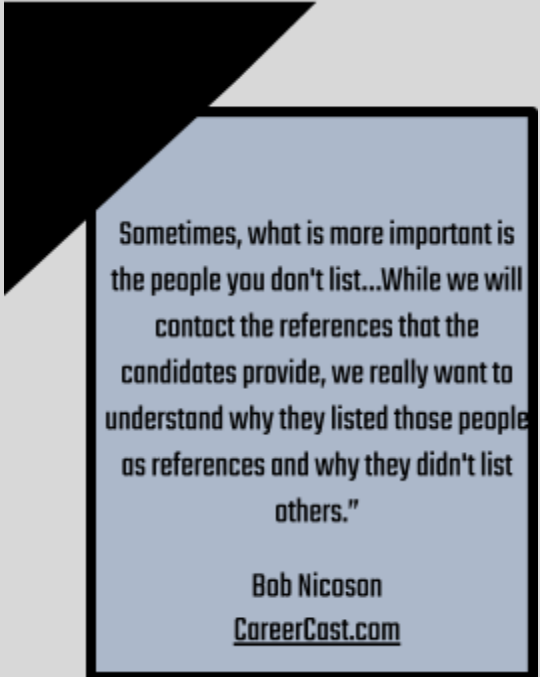
In Your Experience...

One of my favorite questions to ask references is "what was your experience working with this candidate?" This free form question allows the reference to speak freely about their own experiences and perspective and is geared to put the reference at ease.

Check Context

Find out in what capacity they managed or supervised your candidate. Were there others on the team as well or just the candidate? Were other managers involved?

Learn from the reference's perspective what the candidate's role was and what they did. Then you are able to compare what the candidate told you in their interview with the reference's perspective.



Sometimes, what is more important is the people you don't list...While we will contact the references that the candidates provide, we really want to understand why they listed those people as references and why they didn't list others."

Bob Nicoson
CareerCast.com

Asking “The Question”

Outlined by Bradford Smart in his book [Topgrading](#) is perhaps one of the most important questions involved in a reference check. The question goes like this:

“What would you rate this candidate on a scale of 1-10? What could they do/could have done to get to a (the next highest number)?”

Identify Performance

What were the candidate’s performance expectations and how did the company or manager determine the candidate was meeting expectations and doing a good job? How did this candidate perform in relation to other employees? Did they exceed expectations?

- **Feedback:** How was this candidate with receiving and giving feedback? What was their communication style?
- **Strengths and Weaknesses:** From the reference’s perspective, what were the candidate’s greatest strengths and weaknesses? Did they work well with other people or were they best when left alone to get their work done?

Overall Recommendation

We always want to ask the reference if there is anything else they would add to the conversation or if there is something they want us to know that we haven’t yet discussed.

Before finishing, ask if they would recommend this candidate for a job, and especially the job you’ve described, based on their experience working with them. Would the reference rehire this candidate? Why or why not?

Closing

It is important to thank the reference for their time, especially if “it’s against company policy” because they are doing you a



solid by providing feedback that will be helpful in your hiring process, despite their own company rules.

Need more help?

Download our Reference Check infographic [here!](#)

In Summary...What Does This All Mean?

Now that we've outlined the reference checking process, consider the next steps:

Compare Notes

You've got your reference, now what? Once you've obtained your candidate's reference, compare notes. You'll want to check for similarities and differences between what you learned from the candidate about their experience and also from what the reference said.

Red Flags

Identify any red flags or inconsistencies that came up during the reference check. It may help to ask similar types of questions to both the candidate and reference in order to determine consistency and also identify if the candidate embellished their successes or downplayed their failures at all.



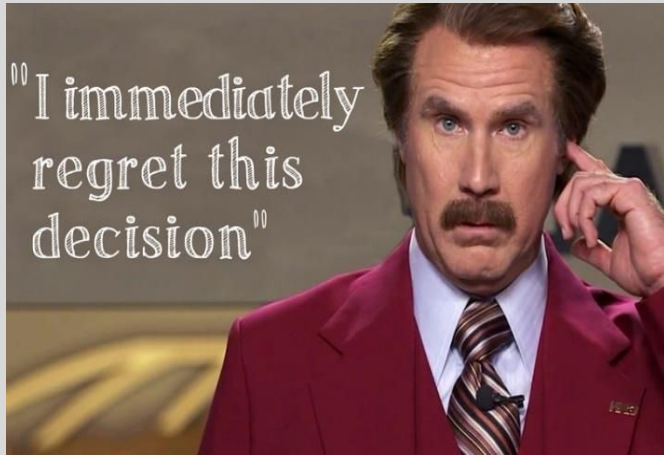
Taking the Next Step

Evaluate what you've learned from the reference check(s) and apply it to the overall assessment of your candidate. What are the next steps you must take with the candidate to complete the reference checking process and how does this apply to your own hiring process?

At this point, many companies may proceed with making an offer to the candidate and yet others will conduct background checks, driving record checks, and drug screens. Whatever step comes next, congratulate yourself! Have a drink! It's 5 o'clock somewhere and you're almost done!

Implementing Reference Checks in Your Process

While obtaining a candidate reference is just one part of the interview process, it's a pretty important step. As outlined in the US Office of Personnel Management's [report](#), reference checks are a "vital part of a



successful hiring strategy [and] aims to verify the information a candidate provided [e.g., resume] and can provide a different perspective. Both instances present a better picture to the hiring manager of how the candidate would perform on the job."

A reference check provides employers some sort of insurance policy, or at the very least, some further reassurance

that their candidate can and will perform successfully on the job by looking at past behavior.

We gather a lot of information by viewing a candidate's resume and during an interview. The one problem with these information-gathering approaches is that all of the information provided thus far has been self-generated by the candidate.

The beauty of the reference is that it provides an outside and, assumingly, more objective view of a candidate's strengths, weaknesses in relation to the job, and other areas of special interest to the company or hiring manager. Reference-checking allows us to identify any 'grey areas' says Paul Slezak, co-founder at [RecruitLoop.com](#), that might not be easily visible in interviews or on a resume.

Referencing also allows us to identify 'grey areas' from the candidate's CV or from their interview such as the reasons they may have left a past position.

It's frightening to think of the number of recruiters who will actually rely on the feedback gained from a 2-minute phone conversation; or who might make a placement without even carrying out any reference checks at all.

Paul Slezak, Co-Founder
[RecruitLoop.com](#)

About Us

The Hire Talent offers pre-employment assessment tools that help companies hire better people through a multi-faceted approach to assessment. We look at candidates from all angles, including their current level of competency and logic, behavioral and personality preferences, and measures of attitude and integrity.

We have contributing published content found on ERE.com, Recruiter.com, and Monster.com and publish our own content at least bi-monthly on our site. For more information, please visit www.TheHireTalent.com.

For more information on conducting powerful interviews in addition to reference checks, please check out our [Power Interview Guide](#) to assist in this process.

We also wrote the book on hiring (literally) and it can be found [here](#).

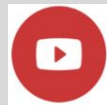
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