Publication: *CPA*
July 2017

Tips to Get the Most Out of Reference Checks

Interviews reveal a lot about potential hires — but they may leave some stones unturned.

Reference checks can give you more insight into a candidate's experience, abilities, work ethic and more. They're like insurance policies that could save you the cost of a bad hire. Too often, though, hiring managers hurry through or even skip this vital step.

To be doubly sure of a candidate's abilities before making a job offer, it helps to find out more about that person from other sources. Here are several best practices for reference checking that can help improve this important aspect of your hiring process.

Don't pass the buck

Busy managers often delegate reference checks to human resources staff or another member of the interview team. But if you're the one the new hire will report to, it's important that *you* take the time to speak to their references personally — because you have the most at stake.

Take time to prepare before contacting anyone

Get organized and compile a list of reference check questions. Here are some basic queries:

- What were the candidate's primary responsibilities and last job title?
- What are their most outstanding skills or qualities?
- What additional training could they benefit from?
- How did they react and respond to feedback or constructive criticism?
- Would you rehire them? Why or why not?

Pick up the phone

It's quick and easy to simply email questions to everyone on a candidate's list of references, but this method won't yield the best results. For one, your email may never even make it to their inbox if they have a strict spam filter. Speaking directly with a person is ideal, as people tend to go into more detail in phone conversations.

Don't ask close-ended questions

Word your reference check questions in a way that requires thoughtful answers, and avoid putting words in the reference's mouth. For example, don't ask, "You think Jill is a team player, right?" A better way to phrase this would be, "Can you tell me about Jill's collaboration skills?"

Listen closely for things that are *not* said

Pay attention to cues that indicate a non-endorsement, such as hesitations in a reference's response or qualifying statements like, "He was a *fairly* good bookkeeper." Also, the person's tone might be telling when talking about certain aspects of a former employee.

Document the calls

Create a spreadsheet and log the date and time of each reference check. Take good notes during the conversation. Afterward, jot down all impressions you gleaned from the call.

Avoid cold calling

Start with the references the candidate has provided to you. If you want to contact any person who is not on that list, such as former supervisor, ask the candidate to make the connection first. To do otherwise may come across as unprofessional and put your company in a bad light. And never call a current employer without the candidate's express permission.

Aim for variety

Some job candidates will give hiring managers a list of their former bosses. Others may only provide contact information for present and past colleagues. For a 360-degree picture of a potential hire's technical and nontechnical skills, collegiality, strengths and weaknesses, and so on, try to talk to more than one type of reference.

Get expert guidance

Reference check regulations differ by state. If you have any doubts about whether to ask references a certain question about a candidate, then be sure to consult your company's legal or human resources department before making contact.

In a competitive hiring climate for accounting and finance professionals, you may be tempted to make an immediate job offer to a promising candidate who aces the interview. But rushing the process can lead to mistakes. So, ask for references and take the time to call all the people on the list. Reference checks are a way to confirm that your golden candidate is the real deal.

Accountemps, a Robert Half company, is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm for temporary accounting, finance and bookkeeping professionals. Accountemps has more than 325 locations worldwide. More resources, including job search services and the Accountemps blog, can be found at roberthalf.com/accountemps.

# # #