

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE – REFERENCE CHECKING

Prepared by the Division of Human Resources in the Department of Personnel & Administration. Revised August 15, 2013

GENERAL

Reference checking is an objective evaluation of an applicant's past job performance based on information collected from key individuals (e.g., supervisors, peers, subordinates, etc.) who have known and worked with the applicant. Reference checking is a vital part of a successful hiring strategy and is primarily used to:

- Verify the accuracy of information provided by the candidate
- Better predict the candidate's on-the-job success by comparing their experience to the competencies required by the job
- Gain additional insight on the candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities that may not have been identified by other selection procedures

Reference checking aims to verify the information a candidate provided and can provide a different perspective on their performance. Both instances present a better picture to the appointing authority of how the candidate would perform on the job. Verifying critical employment information can significantly cut down on selection errors. Information provided by former peers, direct reports, and supervisors can also be used to forecast how applicants will perform in the job being filled.

Reference checks are conducted once the applicant pool is narrowed down to the top candidate(s) known as referrals.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who conducts the reference checks?

Typically, the person who will be making the final hiring decision, the appointing authority conducts the reference checks. Alternatively a human resources (HR) professional may check references.

How many references should be contacted?

Contacting multiple references can be beneficial to gather different perspectives on a candidate's skills and abilities. Typically, candidates provide three (3) references for the appointing authority (or HR professional) to contact. If those references are not available, or if additional perspectives are desired, you can ask the candidate for additional references.

Who should serve as a reference?

The reference should have been in a position to directly observe the candidate and be of a professional nature (previous or current supervisors, coworkers, professors, etc.) and not personal (friends, relatives, etc.). References that have had the most recent contact with the candidate may be better able to provide specific and accurate feedback. Less recent references

may not be aware of new skills the candidate may have developed. On the other hand, there may be circumstances where a less recent reference has the best knowledge of the competencies that are most important for the position to be filled. Accordingly, you will need to use judgment and weigh the information references provide appropriately to the situation.

Should I obtain a candidate's consent to check their references?

Yes, when you ask a candidate to provide references, you should obtain their permission to contact their references. Consent can also be granted via language on the job application (e.g., a statement that all information provided by the candidate will be verified), CO-Jobs or a similar agency developed form before the interview, or orally (e.g., during the interview).

What if the candidate asked not to contact their current supervisor?

This is a common request and is an option within CO-Jobs, the online staffing system. One option is to ask if their current supervisor can be contacted during the interview or once a tentative offer has been extended to the candidate. If a candidate has asked their current supervisor not be contacted, ask the candidate to provide alternative references.

Are reference checks mandatory?

Although DPA highly encourages State agencies to conduct reference checks and offers guidance, it is not required as part of the hiring process.

DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR REFERENCES

Reference checking has been shown to be a useful predictor of job performance, training success, promotion potential, and employee turnover. As with employment interviews, adding structure to the reference checking process can greatly enhance its validity and usefulness as an employee selection procedure. Strategies for structuring reference checking include basing questions on a job analysis, asking applicants the same set of questions, and providing interviewers with standardized data collection and rating procedures.

What should I consider when planning my questions?

Develop questions relevant to the position under consideration. For example, if the position requires the candidate to adhere to strict guidelines, asking a reference about the candidate's ability to follow work procedures might be appropriate. Ensure questions are open-ended and based on behavior the references are likely to have observed. Consider time constraints when deciding how many questions to ask. Consider how long it will take the references to answer the questions. Keep the list of questions to a manageable number.

CALLING REFERENCES

How shall I contact references?

The best way to contact a reference is usually by phone. Compared to written requests, phone interviews allow the checker to collect reference data immediately and to probe for more detailed information when clarification is needed. Phone interviews also require less time and effort on the part of the contact person and allow for more candid responses about applicants. When contacting the reference, briefly tell the reference who you are and why you are calling. Provide a brief overview of the position being filled and an estimate of how long the call will take. It may be helpful to let the reference know the candidate has given permission to have his or her references checked. To ease into the conversation, begin with basic questions (e.g., reference's relation to the candidate, candidate's title and dates of employment), then move on to more in-depth questions.

What if the reference refuses to provide any information?

Some agency policies do not allow the release of a previous employee's information. At a minimum, most will provide start and end dates and position titles. If you are not able to get the information you are seeking, you can ask the candidate to provide another reference.

Can I call references provided by the candidate's references?

A reference provided by the candidate may, in turn, refer you to other individuals who can provide additional information. Asking the candidate for consent to contact the new references demonstrates consideration for the candidate.

HANDLING REFERENCE INFORMATION

What is the best way to handle the information gathered from a reference check?

Your agency may have policies or guidelines for maintaining this information. Please check with your HR department for guidance. While checking references, it is possible the candidate may view a situation, interaction, or goal accomplishment differently than a reference; consequently, some discrepancies may emerge. If you receive information differing from what the candidate said, it may be beneficial to allow the candidate an opportunity to clarify.

SUGGESTED REFERENCE CHECKING STEPS

- Decide who will conduct the reference check (e.g., appointing authority, HR professional).
- Develop questions for references (see sample questions).

Step 1

- Inform candidates you will be checking their references and request permission if not already obtained (e.g., CO-Jobs, verbally or other selection processes).
- Contact references. Briefly describe the position and the duties the candidate will perform. Ask the identified questions and follow up questions if necessary. Record the answers.
- Contact additional references, as applicable.
- Clarify with the candidate any conflicting information received by references.

Step 2

- Ensure materials are stored and retained according to agency policy.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- In what capacity did you work with the candidate (e.g., peer, colleague, supervisor)?
- Could you give me a brief description of the duties the candidate performed?
- What were the candidate's strengths? What were the candidate's weaknesses or areas where the candidate could improve?
- Would you recommend him/her for this position? Why or why not?
- How well did the candidate know the work? How well did the candidate perform on the job? How well did the candidate manage the workload?
- How would you describe the candidate's relationships with co-workers, subordinates, and supervisors?
- Is there anything else you can tell me about the candidate's ability to perform his/her job?
- What kind of work-related training, certificates, education, or other qualifications does the candidate have?
- Is the candidate eligible for re-hire in your organization?

REFERENCE CHECKS DO'S AND DON'TS

Here is additional information to consider as you prepare to conduct reference checks.

DO:

- Do contact at least three former employers. References should be checked before making a job offer.
- Do ask questions pertaining to the new job. Be sure you have a business-related reason for asking for and using the information.
- Do contact the most current/and or a recent employer for whom the applicant worked for a significant time.
- Do use lines that provoke more than factual answers, like "Please complete this sentence: if there is one thing I could change about the job candidate, it's..."

- Do consider whether performance problems reported by previous employers are in areas that might affect performance in the position you're filling.
- Do start with close-ended questions and questions that are easily answered (dates of employment etc.). Close with an open-ended question. "Is there anything else you'd like me to know about this individual?"
- Do sum up at the end and be sure to thank the reference for the information.
- Do keep a record of each referee, with name and phone number so anyone else in the organization can phone and follow up.

DON'T:

- Don't forget to ask about social skills. Customer service, interaction skills with other staff, tardiness etc. are very important and could affect job performance.
- Don't raise any questions that fall under the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) discriminatory practice areas, such as questions regarding gender, race, color, national origin, age, disability, or religion. Do not ask about medical information, marriage status or children. Contact HR if you need additional clarification.
- Don't let letters of references substitute for phone calls or e-mail inquiries.
- Don't forget that e-mail messages become a part of the documentation.

Every attempt is made to keep this information updated. For additional information, refer to the *State Personnel Board Rules and Director's Administrative Procedures* (rules) or contact your department human resources office. Subsequent revisions to rule or law could cause conflicts in this information. In such a situation, the law and rule are the official source upon which to base a ruling or interpretation. This document is a guide, not a contract or legal advice.

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