

The Reference Check: More than a Formality

Most hiring organizations underestimate the amount of information one can obtain from reference checks if you both ask and listen carefully. You're looking not just for things that will rule out a candidate but for things that will help you make distinctions among candidates, or will help ensure that the person you pick will be positioned to succeed within the organization.



Though in some cases you might only conduct a reference check on your clear first choice, in other cases it makes sense to gather references for more than one finalist. Information from the reference check may elevate a finalist to “the” candidate and/or help you think from the start about how to support and develop this person appropriately.

Certainly, the reference check can reveal information that causes you to eliminate someone as a candidate. For example, you may find that the candidate has exaggerated information about employment history or education on his or her resume, or has a history of failing to collaborate effectively with coworkers. Establishing trust with each reference is critical for getting answers that go below the surface.

The person giving the reference needs to know that you are interested and invested in making sure this is a good fit for the organization and the individual and are not just looking for “dirt” or a confirmation of what you already know. In order to do so, you need to spend time up front with the reference to introduce yourself and to explain the specific opportunity. Though you're clearly looking for specific information, you may find that references are more forthcoming when the process feels like a conversation.

Taking insightful references on prospective employees is essential, but how do you get started? You can either have a third party take references for your candidate or you can conduct the references internally.

Either way, it is helpful to contact a number of references—ideally five to six for senior-level candidates—to gather both:

- **Hard data**—confirmation of the candidate’s track record, skills, and competencies, including information about the role the candidate played within the organization, specific responsibilities, and performance
- **Qualitative data**—tangible examples that allow you to better understand the candidate’s management and communication style, track record, and strengths and areas for improvement, including more qualitative questions about the individual’s style, interpersonal interactions, and approach to work

Your goal in conducting references is to speak with individuals who have known and worked with the candidate, ideally for a long period of time and in different settings. When asking for a reference list, you should suggest that candidates provide references that include peers, direct reports, their own bosses, and/or individuals external to their organizations with whom they worked fairly closely (e.g., a vendor, a client, or a partner in a collaboration). Speaking with this broad list of people should provide a rounded view of how a candidate interacts with people at different levels within and outside the organization.

Again, if at all possible, avoid questions that elicit a “yes” or “no” response. Rather, you should focus on questions that are open-ended and allow the reference to describe events, accomplishments, and difficulties. Ask for examples and explanations. Listening carefully and drilling down below the surface of initial comments will make a reference truly useful. For example, if someone notes that a candidate was a great manager but didn’t get along well with the CEO, you might ask, “Is that unusual in the organization?”

It is important to listen not just to the overall comments a reference makes but also to the specific word choices and the tone and enthusiasm with which the reference describes the candidate. If he or she makes a comment that seems unclear, ask a follow-up question. Keep your antennae up for shifts in tone, long pauses, or hesitations that might indicate that you’ve hit a sensitive or troublesome subject. Acknowledge the shift, be willing to follow up, and, most importantly, probe the source. Also keep an ear out for overly enthusiastic references without sufficient depth of examples to back up the praise.

Confidentiality

Reference checking has its own set of confidentiality and legal issues. You must always get permission from the candidate before taking references. You should ask them to sign a release giving you permission to check both named and unnamed references as well as to conduct credit and background checks, and you cannot legally start that process until they do. (Note: Credit and background checks are standard in some industries, and several companies provide this service for a reasonable fee. If you use an outside vendor to conduct background checks, you will need to comply with the Fair Credit Reporting Act.) In addition, your personal notes from a referencing conversation are not to be shared. Instead, write up a summary of each reference check to share with the full search committee. To protect the reference giver, do not attribute sources of specific quotes or comments, and destroy handwritten notes once the referencing report is written. Note that candidates can request a copy of the reference report and any stored information in their files. And of course, [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines](#) on discriminatory questions for interviews apply to reference checks as well.

Many organizations turn to professional third parties for reference checks. Why? Professional recruiters are able to gather information objectively that allows the organization to benchmark the candidate's skills and personal qualities against the job description. In addition, while candidates generally do not offer references who would not give glowing testimonials, professional recruiters have extensive personal and professional networks that often allow the organization to benefit from references that have not been named by the candidate. Furthermore, as professional recruiters tend to do reference checks much more frequently than any given nonprofit leader, their expertise and comfort in making reference calls may help get the most out of each one.

Sample Reference Check Questions

A number of sample questions are listed on the next page. You may also tailor questions to specific areas you'd like to probe about each candidate, or to how he or she would respond to specific aspects of the job under consideration. The person offering the reference will be able to tailor his or her responses to what is most relevant if you first give a sense of the position and what would be expected of the candidate.

Though it is helpful to have some sample questions and other written prompts ready as necessary, reading directly from a list of questions may set an unnecessarily formal tone. Do your best to make the person giving a reference feel as though he or she is having a natural, flowing conversation.

Opening the conversation

- Please tell me a little bit about yourself and how you know XX? (How long, in what context? How often were you in contact, etc.?)

General impressions

- How would you characterize your experience working with XX?

Personal attributes

- What kinds of personal qualities come to mind when you think of XX?

Achievements

- What impact has XX had on the organization? In his or her department?
- What are his or her biggest accomplishments or key contributions to the organization (examples)?
- How does this person compare with other executives in similar positions in your organization or comparable organizations?
- What kind of legacy did XX leave?

Leadership skills

- How would you describe XX's style of leadership?
- How is she or he a visionary? Examples?
- How has he or she been able to increase the visibility of the organization?
- How creative is XX in building resources and diversifying funding? Has he or she done fundraising?

Strategic thinking abilities

- What involvement did XX have in developing the strategic plan for the department or organization? What specifically did she or he contribute?
- How has XX demonstrated his or her strategic thinking ability? Examples?

Management style

- How would you characterize XX's general management style? (e.g., authoritative, consultative, task master, etc.)?
- How does XX go about managing up?
- What type of work environment does he or she need to succeed?
- How would XX's direct reports describe his or her management style? Supervisors?
- How does XX go about making tough decisions? Is she or he inclusive? Fair? Abrupt? Random?
- Other?

Operational effectiveness

- Please describe his or her operational and (if relevant) financial management abilities.
- What types of policies, procedures, or processes did XX implement?

Emotional intelligence

- How does XX deal with conflict? How rigid or flexible is she or he?
- How did you see him or her grow while you were working together?
- How well does XX build consensus among constituents with differing opinions or interests?
- Examples?

Internal and external communication skills

- How would you describe XX's communication skills: verbal and written?
- How well does XX listen? How does she or he engage people?
- How often and did XX keep his or her supervisors, direct reports, peers, etc. updated? What methods did he or she use?

Areas for development and support

- Given that no one is perfect and everyone has areas in which he or she can improve, can you describe any areas XX can or should continue to develop?
- From what you have shared, can you tell me how this trait has impacted XX or the rest of the team? Do you see any liabilities or downsides to XX taking this position?
- What have been XX's biggest professional challenges? How did she or he overcome them? Examples?
- If you were to do an appraisal on XX, what would his or her development objectives be?
- What would you see as the ideal position for him or her? Why?
- Where does XX need the most support?

Closing

- How would you summarize XX as a candidate for this position?
- Is there an experience that you have had with XX that is particularly memorable to you?
- Why did XX leave the company? Was it his or her decision?
- Would you hire or work with him or her again? If not, why not?
- Is there anything else that I should know about before moving XX forward in the process? (A MUST-ASK QUESTION!)
- Is there anyone else you could recommend as a reference who might have seen XX from a different angle?

- Thank you so much for your help and insight. Do you mind if I contact you again in case I have additional questions?

Again, it is critical that anyone conducting a reference avoid discriminatory questions and use and report on the information gathered in a legally acceptable manner. The Association of Executive Search Consultants (<http://www.aesc.org>) is an excellent source for more information on the ethical standards surrounding gathering references.

Given how important it is for your organization to make a good hiring decision, you may also want to look beyond gathering references and utilize other methods of screening candidates' backgrounds, including verification of:

- **Employment history:** Dates, positions, and actual responsibilities can be checked with the specific employers listed.
- **Educational degree:** You can call registrars at colleges and universities to check on diplomas, and you can verify some certifications (e.g., CPAs) online.
- **Criminal and civil records:** There are both specialized investigative firms and web-based services that can help you conduct criminal and credit checks on a candidate. In all cases, candidates must be made aware ahead of time that their backgrounds are being checked and must acknowledge their consent in writing. The legal requirements related to criminal records checks are complex, and there are serious penalties associated with failure to comply with the applicable legal requirements. It is important to confer with experienced employment counsel to ensure that your background check process is compliant.

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