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It's not uncommon for a job application to contain facts that are less than truthful. This makes verification of information provided on applications, in resumes, and during interviews by prospective employees a critical step in all hiring decisions.

Before we extend an employment or contract offer to a candidate, we conduct reference checks to validate our final assessment of the candidate:

- ◆ Confirm what they've told us is correct
- ◆ Confirm that their self-perception is shared by others who've worked with them in the past
- ◆ Confirm dates and information presented on the resume
- ◆ Gain additional insight into how to get the best out of the candidate if we were to hire him or her.

Reference Checking Fundamentals

Reference Checking Is Not Optional

Even though there may be pitfalls to avoid in reference checking (see end of this guide), it's critical we make every effort to speak with at least 2 work-related references per candidate, preferably 3. Having multiple references allows us to see consistency among reference provider feedback, and demonstrate we've made reasonable effort to confirm information provided by the candidate.

CUSTOMIZER: Insert this bullet if appropriate for your jurisdiction The risk associated with not checking references goes beyond just making a bad hiring decision. If an employee causes injury and we can't demonstrate that we made reasonable enquiries prior to hire, the hiring decision maker and the Company can be found legally and financially responsible. Exercising due diligence is the best protection against legal exposure.

Get References from Each Candidate

Once you have selected the top finalist(s) for the position, advise the candidate(s) you will be checking references and ask them to provide the following for 3 references:

- ◆ First and last name
- ◆ Current Title
- ◆ Phone number
- ◆ Email address
- ◆ Contact restrictions (e.g., Call at home, evenings only)
- ◆ Your title when you worked together
- ◆ Reference Provider's title when you worked together
- ◆ Company where you worked together

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more of these reference providers may not give a positive reference, they will have to disclose and explain why.

Taking this approach creates opportunity to have a conversation with the candidate about some challenges they may have had with a certain employer and the reasons for it. It makes for an honest conversation and alerts you to the potential for those challenges re-appearing in our work environment, or not!

Of course, there are exceptions. Use your judgment about what type of references will be acceptable.

Decide Who Checks Each Reference

Important! Compliance with privacy laws may require you to obtain written authorization from a candidate to conduct a reference check before you contact that reference. That means the names of each reference must be included when using the on the *CR-ALL-2830. Reference Check Request & Consent Script* or in the consent email. **This is not optional.**

Once permission is received from the candidate to contact each reference, you may contact them. HR should conduct at least one reference check to assess cultural fit and evidence the candidate demonstrates our Company Core Success Traits. The remaining checks can be done by the Hiring Manager, HR, or both.

Factors to consider when deciding who will conduct each reference check:

- ◆ **Familiarity with position competencies:** The individual should be thoroughly familiar with the duties of the position being filled, the skills required to perform the duties, and the behavioral competencies required for the position.
- ◆ **Knowledge of team culture and personalities:** The reference checker should have a good understanding of the team culture and team member personalities to probe for cultural fit in the position.
- ◆ **Fit with Hiring Manager:** Generally speaking, the Hiring Manager is best suited to check references relating to technical skills, cultural fit with the department, and personality fit with the Hiring Manager.

If you're not an experienced reference checker, contact HR who will support and shadow you throughout the reference checking process.

Set up an Appointment

There is nothing more frustrating than playing telephone tag with a reference provider—for both of you. It can sometimes take a week or more to make verbal contact.

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culture, and if there are historical patterns of toxic behaviors. Missing knowledge or skill can usually be acquired through training, but patterns of negative behaviors are much more difficult—if not impossible—to change. Reference check interviews are an invaluable opportunity to ask those types of questions of someone who has already worked with the candidate.

What Not to Ask. What Not to Say.

As in any other employment interview, questions that could be deemed discriminatory are off limits. This includes remarks or questions related to age, race, sex, religion, marital status, or national origin. These characteristics are in no way related to past or future job performance, and should never be included in a conversation with a reference provider.

You don't have to tell reference providers upfront whether or not the information they provide will be disclosed to the applicant. However, if they ask, tell them you'll do everything you can to keep the feedback and source confidential, but don't make promises. If a reference provider mentions something that concerns you, you may want to discuss it with the candidate.

Reference Check Form

Prepare a Reference Check Form in advance that you can use as a script to ask questions and record responses while you're on the phone. The follow-up questions you ask will vary from one interview to the next, but using a form and script ensures you ask the same basic questions of all reference providers and don't accidentally miss key questions.

- ◆ Use *CR-ALL-2820-M. Reference Check Form* as a template for the Reference Check Form along with its accompanying *Instructions*.
- ◆ Refer to *PC-ALL-2810-M. Reference Check Questions* for a list of sample reference check questions.

Conducting the Interview

What to Expect

Reference checking can be challenging. Employers who freely provide information in response to a reference check are becoming rare. Based on the advice of legal counsel, many employers have adopted policies to protect themselves from litigation from former employees. You may encounter policies such as:

- ◆ **No Comment.** No information is provided about former employees.

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Watch for obvious pauses. Hesitation before answering a question can be a clue, and further probing may yield important information.

Probe

Use follow-up questions to clarify responses, and probe to get the details you need. A good reference checker is a master conversationalist and not a robotic question reader. Probing should be part of the natural flow of the conversation.

A good way to probe is to discover how the candidate could improve in a certain area. For example, ask the reference provider, *“So, how would you rate John on his conflict resolution skills? Zero to ten.”* If the answer is less than 9, ask, *“What would bring his rating up to a 9 or 10?”*

Avoid questions that can easily be answered with a yes or no answer. Instead, ask questions that provide concrete insights. For example, don't ask, *“Was Joan easily frustrated at work?”* Instead, ask, *“Everyone has a pet peeve. What was Joan's biggest one at work? What really bugged her?”*

If you sense a reference provider is reluctant to discuss certain topics or is resistant to probing, try one or more of the following:

- ◆ Explain why you're 'digging'. This helps reference providers understand the purpose of your questions and will often illicit exactly the information you want.
- ◆ Remind them that there are no right answers, and you know no one is perfect. Explain that the candidate has made it to this point of the process for good reason, and it's helpful to understand all facets of a prospective employee, good and bad.
- ◆ Make sure they understand that information provided will help you manage the candidate and help them be successful.
- ◆ Back off. Do not let it get to the point where the reference provider feels uncomfortable. A reference check is not an interrogation and it's your responsibility as the reference checker to know when to pull back.

Document Everything

Document all conversations with reference providers. Record all attempts to contact the reference provider, and when you do make contact, record the information given, questions not answered, and your impression of reference provider responses.

This documentation will be useful to defend your hiring decisions, both internally to hiring stakeholders, and externally if there is ever a need to investigate a complaint.

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- ♦ **Get a trusted, outside opinion.** In today's connected, online world, it's not hard to find someone's former manager or colleague, even if the candidate didn't give you their name. Call one or more of them and get another perspective. They may provide the best feedback, especially if they know you and understand your style and 'fit' requirements.
- ♦ **Probe deeper.** One person's 'nightmare' employee might be your 'dream'. Understand what the reference provider means by 'nightmare' and consider if it's a bad thing for you. Maybe:
 - Mary was competent and showed a lot of initiative, and the reference provider resented her for it
 - Mary's propensity to challenge the status quo and offer a constant stream of ideas drove her manager nuts, but that's exactly what you're looking for
 - Mary needs coaching on how and when to present ideas, but has the raw talent you want
 - Mary has a history of not respecting boundaries and roles, and that won't work for you either
- ♦ **Consider the timing.** In the growth of our careers, every one of us has been inexperienced at each stage of development, and likely made a few dumb mistakes. How long ago did this bad thing happen? Is it recent history, or ancient history? And remember, a candidate's previous error may be the best thing for you and the open position. They likely learned from the mistake and are better/stronger/faster because of it.
- ♦ **Compare 'there' vs. 'here'.** Consider the environment your candidate came from when evaluating feedback from a reference provider. Mary may not have been a good fit in that environment – which is why she's looking for a different job – but could be perfect in yours. A few 'there vs. here' factors to consider:
 - Company culture – Supportive vs. competitive? Slow- vs. fast-paced? Fixed vs. flex office hours? Union vs. open shop? Government vs. private sector? Entrepreneurial vs. established? In-seat or telecommuting?
 - Company size and growth – Big vs. small? Centralized or distributed? Start-up vs. established? Growing vs. status quo or shrinking? Spending vs. saving?
 - Managerial style – Dictatorial vs. collaborative? Trusting vs. suspicious? Open door vs. closed? Communicative vs. 'you should know'?
 - Work expectations – High vs. low stress? High vs. low risk tolerance? 24/7 availability vs. Mon-Fri 9-5? 'Go the extra mile' vs. 'just do your job'?
- ♦ **Understand who's giving the reference.** You don't know anything about the person you're talking to. Good managers hire, appreciate and support employees who are smart and good at their jobs, whereas bad managers are intimidated by good people. Perhaps the manager providing the reference is a dud and the candidate is a superstar who's been de-motivated after years of micro-managing and incompetence.

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forthcoming of references, it may be worth a phone call. You never know what people will say when you ask them.

- ◆ **Get a reference from someone who left the company.** Ask the candidate if there's a trusted co-worker who has left the candidate's current employer and may be willing to provide a reference.

Reference Providers Who Only Say Good Things

Sometimes you come across reference providers who cannot think of one area of improvement for the candidate, or provide nothing but glowing adjectives to describe them. Unfortunately, you can't give this reference much weight. If the reference provider doesn't have the ability or desire to comment on negative traits, they may not have the skill or desire to comment accurately on the positive ones.

If you can't get constructive feedback about a candidate, it's possible the reference provider:

- ◆ Is concerned about potential legal action if they say anything negative
- ◆ Is uncomfortable speaking negatively about anyone
- ◆ Doesn't know the candidate very well and was chosen because they've only had pleasant surface interactions with the candidate and not spent enough time with them to understand their shortcomings. Like dating someone vs. living with them.
- ◆ Is a close friend of the candidate
- ◆ Lacks experience, awareness or ability to notice or critique unfavorable traits
- ◆ Is uneasy with the responsibility of affecting someone else's fate
- ◆ Finds it difficult to articulate shortcomings. They know what they are, but can't describe them
- ◆ Is bound by contract not to give constructive or negative feedback, for example when an involuntary termination package includes a contractual promise to provide a positive reference to help the former employee find employment.

Options in this situation:

- ◆ **Try another approach.** Ask for advice on how best to manage/work with the person to bring out their abilities. If you're not getting answers to standard questions, try painting a picture of your work culture and its unique pressures, so that the reference provider can give a realistic evaluation. For example: "We're a high volume customer service office. The phones don't stop ringing, the paperwork is endless, and we're considering Ms. Smith for a position in our unit dealing with our most demanding customers. Is that an environment in which she'd excel?"
- ◆ **Help the reference provider see their role in perspective.** If they're concerned about affecting someone else's fate, try to downplay the reference provider's role. For example:

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- ◆ Simply ask the question, “Would you re-hire?” They may not answer but it’s worth asking. Employers will usually be honest answering this question. While it may not cement your decision about the candidate, it is a data point.
- ◆ Ask the candidate if they would have any objection to proceeding with the reference check from a previous employer with a no-reference policy, if you were able to reach a manager willing to talk. Then call to see if you can get through.
- ◆ Move on to other references. Ask for more, if needed.

Evaluating Responses

Once the reference checks are all done, the Hiring Manager and HR meet to discuss the results, impressions, identify concerns, and make a hiring decision.

If reference checks have been conducted for multiple candidates, rate and weight the information received in the same manner for all applicants. What disqualifies one applicant should also be the basis for disqualifying another applicant, all else being equal.

If you’re still not sure:

- ◆ Talk to HR about pre-employment testing to help determine fit. This may include skills or behavioral testing.
- ◆ Bring the candidate in to have an honest conversation about your concerns. If you do hire the candidate, you can be sure they’ll make every effort to fix or minimize the effect of any shortcomings, and you’ll be able to monitor performance carefully during the probationary period.