

## REFERENCE CHECKING THAT IS MEANINGFUL

Reference checking often is the final essential step in validating a candidate's suitability for the key responsibilities you have in mind. Yet there is reason to believe barely half of potential employers pursue this last critical step in the hiring process.

A bad hire decision has the potential to harm relationships within and outside your company, costing time, money and productivity to be lost. Thus, effective candidate screening should include reference checking as the final 'due diligence' step, along with interviews, personal interaction, psychological evaluation and appropriate medical/drug screening.

### REFERENCES: WHO?

Candidates typically will offer reference information, including name, title, company, telephone number, and nature of relationship. These contacts will prove adequate but not ideal. Better are former supervisors, colleagues, direct reports, and customers. Consider also your professional network; are there contacts you have who already know this candidate and can offer further insight? Discretion applies of course; respect confidentiality and current employment relationships at all times.

### QUESTIONS: WHAT?

Identify what you need to understand about the candidate. Then, prepare questions that are likely to be answered with sufficient detail, with follow-up questions that encourage additional specifics if needed. For example:

#### IF YOU WANT TO KNOW: CAN THIS CANDIDATE DO THE JOB?

Consider asking: Did this candidate meet your expectations in carrying out job duties?

This question addresses specific ability to do the job, with past performance an indicator of what you can expect. This question gets the reference to explain the specifics of a previous position and describe the candidate's job performance. Drill down as necessary to understand if performance was adequate or exemplary.

Consider asking: How did this candidate handle (name two/three key responsibilities) of the job?

Identify two or three key job responsibilities pertinent to your role / organization. Focus your inquiry around these success factors. Information on how they did will indicate how they are likely to do.

Consider asking: What candidate achievements stand out, impact the company?

You want an achievement-oriented person. References should remember significant accomplishments, concluding, “we were really proud” or “top sales performer” or “took initiative.” Listen for comments that characterize going the extra mile.

**IF YOU WANT TO KNOW: WILL THIS CANDIDATE BE EASY TO GET ALONG WITH?**

Consider asking: Describe this candidate’s relationships with supervisor/peers/direct reports/customers?

Listen for understanding of perceptions of behavior and quality of working relationships. Have there been changes over time that provide a more accurate indication of what to expect in your organization?

**IF YOU WANT TO KNOW: IS THIS CANDIDATE A TEAM PLAYER?**

Consider asking: Where has this candidate gone beyond expectations for the benefit of the project / organization?

Typically, candidates should be team players and meet expectations; you want someone willing to go above and beyond when necessary. References unable to think of stories in answer to this question may be sending a ‘red flag’ indication that this candidate is not a team player or only does just enough to get by on the job.

**IF YOU WANT TO KNOW: ARE THERE BAD HABITS TO BE AWARE OF?**

Consider asking: What should this candidate do differently?

Acknowledge that everyone has areas to work on and you are curious as to what this means regarding your candidate. Listen to the actual answer, but also listen to what that answer tells you. Were the comments related to maturity, inexperience, interpersonal skills, or ability? Is it an area where improvement can be made? Is it an area where experience or development has been lacking? Strong candidates often are aware and focused on improving shortcomings.

Reference checking demands extra effort in preparation and understanding what you have been told; however, the investment in making a good hiring decision is worth the time spent.

For additional support in fine-tuning your selection process for all key positions, contact the business psychologists at Vernon Roche and Hodgson, 262-259-9722. ([www.vrhconsulting.com](http://www.vrhconsulting.com))

Adapted from Moss & McGinty, *connect2*.