

Once a candidate has been screened, interviewed and is among the best qualified pool of candidates, a hiring department must conduct an investigation into the candidate's employment history and qualifications prior to extending an offer of employment. This investigation must include both reference checks and employment verifications. These steps are crucial to curb any negligent hiring practices and help ensure that the individual hired is qualified and will be successful in the role. An "employment verification" differs from a "reference check" but both are equally important to this process.

A "reference check" is obtained by contacting a person who is qualified to provide insight into the knowledge, competencies, abilities, and traits of a candidate; typically this is someone who has directly managed them. A reference check will help determine whether the individual is qualified and is a good *fit* for the department and position at hand.

An "employment verification" is typically obtained by contacting a company's Human Resources department to confirm basic information such as job title, dates of employment, salary and, if possible, supervisor name. Employment verifications serve to validate not only the candidate's employment history, but also the information provided during reference checks.

Reference Checks

The candidate authorizes reference checking at the time of application. You may ask for additional references and contact other individuals beyond the supervisors which are listed on the application. As a courtesy, you should remind the individual during the interview process that references will be checked.

Professional (not personal) references are required for all candidates with past employment history. At least two positive reference checks and hiring proposal endorsement must be obtained prior to extending a job offer. It is highly recommended that the most recent and relevant employment references be checked and information gained during those checks be weighted accordingly. References from previous supervisors or managers must be utilized, but references from colleagues or clients may also be considered when appropriate. Furthermore, references from any party that may have a direct conflict of interest should not be used in meeting the required minimums (ex. relatives, friends).

Reference checks should be conducted via phone and not via e-mail.. When appropriate, contact references via their company phone number and not mobile phone number as this will ensure that you are reaching a legitimate reference. If a mobile phone number is provided, you can call the reference and request to call them back on their work line for this reason.

The interviewer (hiring official) should conduct the reference check as they are most familiar with the job duties and the qualifications presented by the candidate. The [Telephone Reference Check](#) document should be used as a resource; it is highly recommended that some reference check questions mirror those from the interview. As a best practice, the same questions should be asked of all references, but individual follow-up questions may be included. The most useful reference checks are obtained using a conversational approach, as opposed to only asking a list of questions. The interviewer may find it helpful to have the candidate's application, resume and interview notes available during the reference check as well. Refer to what the candidate said in the interview and what is written on the application or resume so that the reference validates the information provided.

Example Approach

Interview question:

Can you describe your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?

Reference check questions:

Joe tells me that his greatest strength is X; is this something that came into play in his role at your company? Can you tell me more about how this strength was an asset to your team?

Joe also tells me that he struggled with X, is this something that you noticed? Was this an area that you focused on developing and did you see improvement?

Interview question:

What experience do you have with X?

Reference check question:

Joe tells me that he was responsible for X, Y, Z and I see from his application that he was also responsible for A, B,C. Can you tell me a little bit more about these duties and how he performed them?

It can be assumed that a candidate will provide contact information for individuals whom they reasonably expect to provide positive remarks. The hiring official that is checking the reference should evaluate a person's ability to meet the department's needs and not just discover that the candidate was a great fit for their last employer - dig deeper.

Employment Verifications

Employment verifications may be conducted by either the hiring official or an administrative or HR team member. Any employment experience that is used to provide a professional reference should be verified as a way to validate the legitimacy of the reference. It is also recommended that you verify employment that is lengthy and/or relevant.

Tips for a successful check:

- Identify yourself immediately, including your position and tell the employer why you are calling.
- If unavailable or hesitant, offer to have the employer call you back or offer to call them back at a designated time to provide the information; a follow-up e-mail to confirm or request a call back could also be used to help affirm your legitimacy.
- Assure the employer that the information discussed will be held in confidence.
- If a company or individual will not provide an employment verification or reference without a release form, you may note the individual's statement from the last page of the application as they have electronically signed and authorized the release of this information.
- Tell the employer about the position for which the candidate is being considered and the key traits you are looking for in an employee within that position.
- Establish a comfortable rapport with the reference; try a conversational approach; ask for examples and welcome opportunities for "story telling."
- Be alert for obvious pauses which may indicate the employer may have other information to share but is hesitant.
- Validate the information provided on the application or resume and obtained during the interview - look for misrepresentations and inflations.
- The same topics that are prohibited in an interview are prohibited during a reference check. These types of questions should be avoided:
 - DO NOT ASK:** Has the candidate...
 - ever filed a discrimination suit against your company?
 - ever filed a Worker's Compensation claim?
 - had personal financial difficulties?
 - had any disabilities or health problems?
 - ever been arrested?
 - ever been married or had children?
- If the reference provides any unsolicited personal information, especially if related to any of the topics above, disregard and do not document or retain.
- Don't end the conversation until you are sure you know the opinion of the employer.
- Always remember to thank the reference for their time; ask if you may follow up with them if more information is needed.
- Check references **thoroughly**. Spending a *little* more time now can save you *a lot* of time, resources and frustration down the road.

Other things to consider:

- Employment verifications will be handled typically by someone other than the person providing the reference. Contacting the company's HR or payroll department may be the best way to validate dates of employment, job title, salary and supervisor's name.
- If the hiring official for the position at hand is also the candidate's current or past supervisor, they cannot be used as one of the required professional references.
- Verify any written letters of recommendation; these cannot be accepted in lieu of a telephone reference check.