

## Network to Work Meeting

Resource Materials – June 2017

# The Keys to Using Job References

If you're like most job-seekers, you may not have put much thought into whom you'll want to use as references when potential employers request them. We're often so busy polishing our resumes and cover letters, researching the companies, and preparing for interviews, that we neglect a very important part of the job search process — requesting people to be references.

How can this article assist you? By helping you see the importance and value of choosing the “right” people to be references, by providing examples of how to develop a references page, and by offering you other keys to using references strategically in your job search.

Perhaps you're saying to yourself, “references don't really matter.” And while it's true that most employers will not conduct a detailed background search on you, many employers will at least contact at least one or two of your references. Do not underestimate the power of your references. Remember, the employer is preparing to make a big investment in hiring you, and wants to be sure you are who you say you are. Having a few good references can be the deciding factor in your getting the job offer. Similarly, having one bad — or lukewarm — reference could cost you the job.

So what are the keys to using job references? Here's one list of the eight keys to choosing and using the best job references in your job search.

### **1. Don't bother with those generic “letters of recommendations.”**

Many employers don't want to read letters written in the past to “whom it may concern.” They want to be able to contact and communicate (via phone or email) with a select group of people who can speak about your strengths and weakness and fit for the job you are seeking. (See sidebar below.) Plus, these letters don't have much credibility because anyone who would write a letter for you would likely say only good things about you.

### **2. Don't list names of references on your resume.**

References belong on a separate sheet of paper that matches the look and feel of your resume, but is simply titled “References” or “Reference List.” And never give references to employers until they request them, but do be sure and keep a list of references with you when interviewing so that you can be prepared to present them when the employer asks. If you have a job-search portfolio, keep the list in your portfolio. See these two sample reference lists.

### **3. Think strategically about reference choices.**

What kind of reference do you want? You want the people who will make the strongest recommendations for you. Former supervisors do not have to be references, especially if they did not know all your accomplishments or you fear they will not have glowing things to say about you. Sometimes former co-workers, or supervisors in other departments who know your work, make the best choices. Again, the key is people who know your strengths and abilities — and who will say positive things about you.

### **4. Consider different categories of references.**

Overall, you ideally want about three to five references — people who can speak highly of your accomplishments, work ethic, skills, education, performance, etc. For experienced job-seekers, most references should come from previous supervisors and co-workers whom you worked closely with in the past, though you may also choose to list an educational (mentor) or personal (character) reference. Avoid listing family members; clergy or friends are okay for personal references. Former coaches, vendors, customers, places you've volunteered and business acquaintances are also acceptable.

### **5. Get permission to use someone as a reference.**

Before you even think of listing someone as a reference, be sure and ask whether the person would be comfortable serving as a reference for you. Most people will be flattered — or at least willing to serve as a reference — but you still need to ask to be sure. Be prepared for a few people to decline your request — for whatever reason.

### **6. Collect all the details for each reference.**

Make sure to get complete information from each reference: full name, current title, company name, business address, and contact information (daytime phone, email, cell phone, etc.).

### **7. Keep your references informed (and perhaps coached).**

Make sure each reference always has a copy of your most current resume, knows your key accomplishments and skills, and is aware of the jobs/positions you are seeking. Again, the best references are the ones who know who you are, what you can accomplish, and what you want to do.

### **8. Be sure to thank your references for their help.**

Don't forget to thank your references once your current job search is complete. Some companies never contact any references, some only check the first one or two, and some check all. Regardless, these people were willing to help you, and thanking them is simply a common courtesy.

**Questions a potential employer might ask one of your references:**

1. Can you please describe how you know the candidate? And for how long?
2. How would you rate the candidate's skills in \_\_\_\_\_?
3. Can you describe the candidate's communications abilities?
4. How well does the candidate work under pressure?
5. Can you describe the candidate's attitude toward work?
6. How well does the candidate take constructive criticism?
7. How well does the candidate interact with co-workers?
8. Is the candidate a team player?
9. How would you describe the candidate's honesty and integrity?
10. Can you describe the candidate's key strengths and weaknesses?
11. How receptive is the candidate to new ideas and procedures?
12. Given a description of the position the candidate is applying for, do you think the candidate is a good match?
13. If you were in a position to hire this candidate for a similar position, would you do so?
14. Can you describe the candidate's leadership, managerial, or supervisory skills?
15. Do you have any additional information or comments that might help us make a better decision about this candidate?

[Adapted from: <https://www.livecareer.com/quintessential/job-references> ]

**Exercise** – use the table below to record the names of potential references – people who know you well and can vouch for you.

Name	
Relationship	
How they can help?	
Date/method of contact	

Name	
Contact information	
Purpose for contacting	
Date/method of contact	

Name	
Relationship	
Purpose for contacting	
Date/method of contact	

Name	
Contact information	
Purpose for contacting	
Date/method of contact	

Name	
Contact information	
Purpose for contacting	
Date/method of contact	

Name	
Contact information	
Purpose for contacting	
Date/method of contact	

Name	
Contact information	
Purpose for contacting	
Date/method of contact	