

Network to Work Meeting

July 2018

RESOURCE MATERIALS – *PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES*

All About Professional References

What Is a Professional Reference?

A professional reference is a recommendation from a person who can vouch for your qualifications for a job. If you are an experienced worker, this person is usually a former employer, supervisor, colleague or someone else who can recommend you for employment.

If you have limited work experience but have participated in community or social organizations, volunteer activities, etc., you might consider tapping connections from that experience. The key is picking references who have observed you acting in a productive capacity where you displayed your skills and credentials for employment.

Professional references differ from personal or character references, which are much more personal in content. The professional reference speaks mainly to employability and work-related qualities, as opposed to personal or character traits. While a personal reference could be helpful, don't submit one as a substitute when the job listing or interviewer specifically requires a professional reference.

Find the Ideal Reference

Similar to your resume and cover letter, you should tailor who you use as a professional reference to the position you are seeking. First, consider the qualifications for that job. Then ask yourself who can vouch that you have the skills, experience, or attributes that are sought and are most critical for success in that job. Your ideal reference will be able to speak very specifically about your abilities using examples from your work.

Someone who can only provide vague positive references to your strengths may be less convincing, so, focus more on people who know your work well as opposed to the most prestigious or highest-ranking individual. Also, consider a reference who can speak to your most notable work-related successes.

Get Consent and Prepare Them

Be sure to get the persons' permission to use them as a reference before you give out their contact information. You don't want someone to appear unprepared or caught off-guard when contacted by a potential employer; this would make you seem unprofessional and unprepared as well.

Also, don't use e-mail to ask someone to be your reference unless this is someone with whom you communicate frequently and with whom you already have a close relationship. Make the request personally over the phone or, even better, over coffee or lunch. Not only does this show greater respect towards the

person you are asking to be your reference, but it also will allow you the opportunity to discuss any specifics you would like them to focus on in their reference. A well-prepared reference will usually be able to provide a more detailed and convincing recommendation when contacted.

Finally, it's important to give your references your current resume so that they can speak to your experiences, talents and skills. You should also share with them the description of each job you're applying for, its specifications and sought after skills and experience, as well as information about the company. That way, your references can tailor their responses to address how your strengths apply to the particular position and company you're applying for, rather than giving generic responses.

Keep your References in the Loop

Keep your references apprised of your progress with the hiring process and give them an immediate heads up right after an interview if you think they might be contacted. Don't wait to call until you get home as the employer may start calling as soon as you leave their office.

If you know the name of the person who may be contacting your references, it's helpful to share that information as well. Ultimately this will benefit you as well because it will help your reference be more prepared to take the call.

Give your references tips on what to focus on and what is irrelevant. Tell them what the hiring manager found interesting and relevant, and share any of your accomplishments that were discussed. You may also discuss with each reference how you want them to answer the "weakness" question. Also, if a particular issue came up during your interview, let your references know about those concerns. They may be able to address the issue during a reference check.

The reference checker is going to be listening for the tone of voice your references use as well as the authenticity of their answers. They will even ask questions in different ways to see if their responses are consistent. The more you can do to help prepare your references, the better they will serve you.

Getting Positive Recommendations

Make sure the individual you select is comfortable providing a positive recommendation for you. Don't assume he or she will provide a strong endorsement when they are only prepared to provide a somewhat positive evaluation of your performance. Therefore, when requesting that an individual act as a reference, ask "Are you comfortable providing a very positive recommendation for me for a (customer service representative) job? I'm trying to make a strong case for my candidacy."

If you are concerned about their response, you could make your request in writing so a reluctant individual can take time to consider your request or decline more comfortably. You might also frame your request in terms of whether they have the time at the moment to be a reference for you.

When You Are Worried About a Negative Reference

If you are worried that a previous manager *not listed as a reference* might be contacted anyway and provide a negative reference, the best strategy can be to provide as many other positive recommendations as possible. This may counteract the impact or make it unnecessary for an employer to seek input from that manager.

If you are certain that the manager will still be contacted despite not being on your reference list, you can also be proactive. Reach out to that former manager, and explain the situation — that you know you didn't part on the best terms, and would not normally put the person down as a reference, but that you believe the hiring company will be in touch anyway. Many people will be willing to let bygones be bygones, and you may be able to negotiate to a reference that you both feel comfortable with.

In some cases, you might have a better relationship with your prior manager's boss and can enlist their support. In other situations, you can tap a combination of colleagues at your level, customers, and any staff who reported to you in order to fill out your roster of references.

Address the Current Boss Issue

If you're currently employed and are not including your current boss as a reference, make sure to explain why to your prospective employer. Most likely, it's because your current boss isn't aware that you're searching for a new job, which most potential employers will understand. However, not addressing why your current boss isn't on your list might send up red flags to your potential employer, so it's *always* best to address the issue.

Ensure You Have Your Reference's Current, Correct & Complete Information

Your list of references may be requested as part of your job application or at the time of an interview. You should be prepared in advance by having your list – prepared on a separate sheet of paper – ready to give out, complete and up to date. Here are the details to provide:

- Reference's Full Name
- Current Job Title
- Company Name
- Business Address
- Current and best contact Information (Daytime Telephone Number; E-mail; Cell Phone Number, etc.)
- The reference's relationship to you/ How you know this reference

Always Thank Your References

Finally, since they agreed to help you with your job search, make sure to thank your references – regardless of whether they were ultimately contacted or whether you obtained the job. A simple thank you note is common courtesy and it maintains your relationship, should you need further references in the future.

Adapted from:

"Learn About Professional References", by Alison Doyle, from *The Balance*, updated April 29, 2018
<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/what-is-a-professional-reference-2062823>

"How to Handle Bad References from Employers", by Alison Doyle, from *The Balance*, updated May 10, 2018.
<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-handle-bad-references-from-employers-2062977>

"12 Tips to Make the Most of Your Job References", by Elizabeth Hoyt, *FastWeb.com*, October 02, 2016
<https://www.fastweb.com/career-planning/articles/twelve-tips-to-make-the-most-of-your-job-references>

"13 Dos and Don'ts for your Professional References", by Colleen Clark, from Workopolis blog, October 20, 2010.
<https://careers.workopolis.com/advice/13-dos-and-donts-for-your-professional-references/>
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