

Network to Work Meeting – July 2019

RESOURCE DOCUMENT - Professional References

Who Makes an Ideal Professional Reference?

When you're applying for jobs, a common request among employers is for you to provide a list of professional references. After your interview, your references could be a key component of whether you receive a job offer from a company.

For each new job opportunity, you need to select people who will emphasize your strengths to potential employers. Therefore, you must consider if your list of references is the right fit. Think about your relationship with each person:

- How closely did you work with them?
- How recently did you work together?
- How will they explain your qualities to the hiring manager?



The following contains examples of who makes an ideal professional reference. Choose at least three of these people to include on your list of professional references.

1. Someone who can attest to your work ethic and who can give specific examples as to how reliable you are
2. Someone who is a big fan of yours, who you know from a full-time or part-time job, an internship, or volunteer work, and who knows your work background and accomplishments very well.
 - This could include: your current manager or supervisor; professional mentors; co-workers; clients; vendors; and individuals you have worked closely with such as teammates, community leaders, teachers, etc.
 - A previous employer can provide the best insight into your work ethic. They know what your responsibilities were at your job and how you handled them.
 - A colleague you worked alongside at a previous job, even if they weren't your boss, can be an excellent reference. They will be able to speak about things you worked on

together and what you achieved as a team. Teamwork is one of the most important soft skills an employer looks for, so having someone to vouch for your teamwork skills is vital.

- Someone who supervised you, but wasn't necessarily your boss, could be another excellent reference to include. This could be a supervisor from a volunteer project, an internship or some other extracurricular activity. Any of these people spent enough time working with you to get a sense of your character, and probably your passions. That combination makes for a great reference.
3. Someone who has known you for at least three months; the more recent the connection, the better.
 4. Someone who is comfortable sharing an honest assessment of you and your professional development, including your awareness and ability to manage your weak points.
 5. Avoid personal references such as family, friends and neighbors as employers know they will be biased.



What do Employers look for in a Professional Reference?

When you're looking for a new job, you'll most likely spend hours refining every point on your job resume, and spend even more time crafting and rewriting your cover letter, but how much time do you spend preparing your list of references? Most likely not a lot!

While it's normal to focus on those important components, you also need to think of how your references will vouch for you when contacted about your qualities and accomplishments by a potential employer. **But what exactly about you should your references cover?**

In general, an employer will look to a reference to provide:

1. A description of past job duties and experience.
2. A view into the applicant's strengths and weaknesses.
3. Confirmation of job title and dates of employment.
4. A description of workplace accomplishments.
5. A sense of the applicant's preferred work culture.

The reference should speak to:

Your Relevant Skills & Qualities

Important things that your references should emphasize are your relevant qualities and skills related to the job position. You want them to share your interpersonal and technical skills that are crucial to your position, and how you used them while you worked together.

Remind them of the projects that you managed for them that reflect those skills and qualities required in your potential new role. Supply them with sufficient details and situations that allow them to showcase your skills and reinforce your capabilities.

Your Strengths

Your references should talk about your strengths in specific situations — not just basic information. They should be ready to provide examples of actual projects where you exceeded expectations. Your reference should be able to easily cite one or two situations that highlight your strengths.

Remember that references are simply telling a story of you as an employee, and the best stories have demonstrative and powerful details. Strengths must be backed by specific, measurable, and tangible results. Supply your references with the necessary talking points to do that.

Your Weaknesses

Just like a job interview, employers will most likely ask your references about your weaknesses. Expect your references to discuss that in an honest way. Claiming that you're perfect will likely not cut it with any potential employer. Everyone has weaknesses. If your references fail to cite one, it takes away you and your references' credibility.

If your reference really knows you well, they'll provide authentic answers, but might want to bring it out in a way that also showed how you rectified the situation. Maybe you went over budget on a poorly planned project that you took over. In this instance, your reference should talk about the progress you took to overcome those weaknesses or challenges.

Other Topics

There are more things that references can say to employers about you. These include reasons why they should hire you, areas you could improve on, and of course your other areas of interest like hobbies.

Other Important Considerations – Reference Dos and Don'ts

1. Be sure to ask an individual in advance if they are willing to be a (positive) reference for you. Be certain your reference is truly willing and able to give you a good recommendation.
 - a. Don't simply ask "Could you give me a reference?"
 - b. Instead, ask:
 - i. "Do you think you know my work well enough to provide me with a reference?" OR
 - ii. "Do you feel you could give me a good reference?"
 - c. If unsure of the kind of reference you might get:
 - i. Ask, "was my job performance such that you would rehire me?", OR
 - ii. Have a friend or reference verification service check your references.



2. Once you have your reference's permission, keep them in the loop about upcoming job interviews and give them a heads up when you will be sharing their name as a reference.

Also, if you asked them a while ago but are getting back into the job search game, give them a heads up that you are starting your search again and they may be hearing from someone. This will also remind them to keep an eye out for any openings for you!

3. Notifying references in advance gives them adequate preparation time. You don't have to explain every detail of your job search, but you can refresh their memory about your past work together, or give them some new updates about your experience and credentials that apply to your job search.
4. It's a good practice to provide your references with an updated resume, cover letter, and professional biography as well. Also, keep them in the loop about your educational and career progress so they can share an honest and credible assessment of you, your capabilities, and development.
5. Don't list your references directly on your resume; instead, prepare a separate sheet of paper for your references.
6. Include this information on your list of references:
 - a. Reference Name, Reference relationship to you
 - b. Company Name

- c. Company Address
 - d. Reference's current phone number
 - e. Reference's current email
7. List at least 3 professional (and 1 character) references depending on the level of the position applied for.
 8. Do not offer your references during an interview; instead, wait until you are asked for them.
 9. Have your reference page typed up and take at least three copies with you on all job interviews.
 10. After giving out your references call each one and tell them about the interview you just had. Tell them about the position and about your accomplishments that were discussed (which the reference can validate).

Give your reference tips of what not to mention that is irrelevant or inappropriate and what to focus on. Educate each reference on what the hiring manager found interesting and relevant.

11. Call your references immediately after providing your list to an interviewer. Don't wait to call until you get home as the employer may start calling as soon as you leave their office.
12. Ensure you know your references are able to take calls. If they are away, their email may be a better way to connect with them.
13. Discuss with each reference how you want them to answer the 'weakness' question.
14. The reference checker is listening for the tone of voice your references use. They are listening for authenticity in their answers. The checker will ask questions in different ways to elicit responses that validate truisms. Even overseas references are telephoned these days, so feel free to provide references living in another country (with appropriate dialing instructions).

Adapted from:

"5 References That Should Be on Your List to Land the Job", by Heather Huhman on Glassdoor.com, May 28, 2019
<https://www.glassdoor.com/blog/5-references-list-land-job/>

"What Your References Should Say About You", by Jordan Perez on Glassdoor.com, August 31, 2017
<https://www.glassdoor.com/blog/what-references-should-say/>

"Who can I use as a reference?", by Kim Costa on SnagAJob
<https://www.snagajob.com/resources/who-can-i-use-as-a-reference/>

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