



# The Art of Reference Checking

**B**e sure to get permission from references before providing their names to potential employers.” Just about every article written for job seekers includes that advice. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that most applicants do that. After all, just about everyone can come up with a list of three to five people who like them well enough to say something positive.

So, how important can checking references be? Is it really wise to spend time on the telephone listening to a candidate’s hand-picked contacts extolling his or her virtues?

Surprisingly enough, the answer is “yes.” Apparently a lot of job seekers ignore the wisdom of obtaining permission from their references, or maybe they simply assume that no one will ever bother to check. It’s amazing how many times DHA recruiters encounter references that provide negative or neutral information.

Contacting the HR department of a former employer may net little beyond the dates of employment and the position the employee occupied. Other employees may be more likely to comment, though they too may be instructed to limit their remarks. The situation becomes even more complicated when third-party

providers of human resource services get involved. Just as automated telephone systems can prevent contact with a “real person” in the absence of a specific name or extension number, these services can provide a barrier that limits contact with those who have personal knowledge of a candidate. That means placing a heavier reliance on candidate-supplied references.

Though reference checks can be conducted by mail or by e-mail, telephone remains the favored medium. Contacting the reference by telephone offers the potential employer an opportunity to develop a rapport with the reference. While a set list of questions should be covered, an advantage of the telephone interview is that it offers the interviewer an opportunity to ask follow-up questions should the reference’s remarks suggest an area for investigation. It helps if the interviewer is somewhat intuitive and attends to verbal cues that may indicate the reference either has more to say about a subject or would prefer to avoid it.

The specific list of questions to be answered in a reference interview varies depending on the candidate’s level of experience and the type of position for which he or she has applied.

## Sample Reference Checking Questions

- 1 Name and job title of the person responding to the interview.
- 2 How long have you known the candidate?
- 3 In what capacity do you know him/her? (supervisor/peer/subordinate)
- 4 How do you think the candidate would fit into the position for which he/she has applied? (after providing an overview of the position)
- 5 Based on your observations, what do you consider to be this candidate’s strengths? Weaknesses?
- 6 Describe a situation that illustrates how this candidate handles conflict in the workplace.
- 7 (If appropriate) Candidate’s dates of employment with the organization. Why did the candidate leave? Would your organization rehire the candidate if the opportunity presented itself?