



Tips for Conducting Reference & Credential Checks

Tips

- ✓ Check the same number of references for all candidates.
- ✓ Ask the same questions of each reference.
- ✓ Ensure at least one reference is a former or current supervisor of the candidate.
- ✓ Document all reference-checking activities.
- ✓ Before asking questions, describe the job and the competencies you are seeking. This gives the reference a chance to structure their thinking.
- ✓ Limit questions requiring “yes” or “no” answers.
- ✓ Avoid questions that elicit unexplained qualitative answers (e.g. “good” or “excellent”). Instead, ask for specific job-related examples in which the applicant demonstrated the particular skills you are assessing.
- ✓ **Don’t ask questions “off the record”** — no answers can be treated as such.
- ✓ Listen “between the lines” to the tone of voice, inflection, and word choice.
- ✓ Do not rate the applicant while gathering information. There will be time to evaluate the information once it has all been collected.
- ✓ Keep the tone conversational. Try not to sound like you are interrogating the reference. Use phrases like, “Can you recall...”

Cautions

- ❖ **Personal reference listed instead of professional reference.** All references should be individuals who have worked with the candidate in a professional capacity and who are not relatives of the candidate.
- ❖ **No references from current employers.** Ensure that at least one reference is from a current or recent employer.
- ❖ **Reference makes an unverifiable statement or uses hearsay.** Unverified statements and hearsay about the candidate’s fitness for the position should not be considered. The purpose of a reference check is to gather evidence (facts, observations, and examples). Opinions should not replace evidence.
- ❖ **“Red flags.”** Note certain things such as lateral moves that could be potential red flags and look into them during the reference check.

What to Do When Making the Reference Call

Introduction and Overview

- Give your name and position/title.
- State the name of the applicant and the purpose of the call. (Instead of saying, “I am doing a reference check on X,” it is preferable to say, “I’ve been talking about a position in my department with X and he/she gave me your name because you know him/her well. May I ask you a few questions?”)
- Ask if it is a convenient time to talk.
- Emphasize the confidential nature of the call.
- Describe the job for which the candidate is being considered. You might also want to describe the nature of Florida State University and your program.

Verify Factual Information

- Confirm the relationship of the reference provider to the candidate (current/former supervisor, coworker, client, teacher, etc.).
- Verify current/last position held (job title, responsibilities, etc.).
- Confirm dates of employment.

Obtain Position/Applicant Specific Information

- Obtain information about the candidate’s primary job responsibilities to check if it matches with the information provided by the candidate.
- Clarify any concerns or areas of uncertainty about the candidate’s background. Follow up on hunches or leads that came up from the application or the interview.
- Ask for specific examples about the candidate’s work performance.
- Describe situations the candidate will face and ask the reference provider if he/she feels the applicant will be able to handle them, why and why not.

Closing

- Ask the reference provider if he/she would like to provide any additional information not covered.
- Ask if you can call back if you have more questions.
- Thank the reference provider for his/her time and assistance.

Post-Reference Check: Evaluation

- Evaluate the quality of the information gathered, especially if there is an impression that the reference provider was not being entirely frank, or if the information provided did not match the information given by the applicant.
- Organize all your notes and document all reference-checking activities.

Sample Questions for Reference Checks

| Type | Sample Questions |
|---|---|
| Basic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you or did you work with or know the candidate? • What is/was the candidate's formal job title and does/did he/she hold other job titles while at your company? • Did you have an opportunity to promote the candidate while she/he worked for you? |
| Job Content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about the candidate's job. What is/were her/his primary responsibilities? |
| Performance Level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you compare him/her with others in your department who are/were performing the same job? • How would you describe the candidate's attendance record and the quality of his/her work? Can you provide some examples? • What are the candidate's strengths? • How would you describe the candidate's work style? • In a few words, how would you summarize the candidate's job performance? • What would have made the candidate more effective? |
| Skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you evaluate the candidate's technical skills? • How would you describe the candidate's interpersonal and written communication skills? • How would you evaluate the candidate's leadership ability? What leads you to that conclusion? • How would you compare the candidate's skills with others performing in the same area? |
| Supervision (for management or supervisory positions) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the candidate's management/supervisory style? • How would the candidate's subordinates describe him/her? • What aspects of the candidate's management style are/were most effective/least effective? |

