Loyola Career Development Center

Strategic References

It is expensive to search for and choose candidates for employment, graduate schools, or fellowships. Most organizations go to great lengths to ensure they are making the best choice they can, so they will not have to repeat this arduous and expensive process again or soon. One of the tactics used during the selection process to minimize this concern is to check a candidate's references.

In today's litigious climate, most organizations have strict rules about what can and cannot be said in a reference for a former employee or student. Typically this is the acknowledgement that you worked or went to school there, the dates you were there, your title or degree, and possibly beginning and ending salaries or wages. This does not tell the selecting organization much about your work ethic, academic potential, skills, or team orientation. Assist the organization in the selection process by providing references who can discuss you and your strengths, skills, and experiences.

1. Ask Permission

Always ask your references if it is okay to include them as a reference. Never assume that it is all right to use someone in this capacity. A lukewarm or negative reference can destroy your efforts.

2. Be Prepared

Have the list of references printed on good resume paper and in the same style as your resume and cover letter. This list should include three to five people and their contact information.

Each reference should include:

- Person's full name, including Mr., Ms., Dr.
- Position or title
- Name of company, organization, or university
- Postal address
- Phone number
- E-mail address
- Relationship to you, e.g. supervisor

WHO IS ON THE LIST?

Only ask people who can speak to your ability to perform well for this potential employer or program. References need to be able to supply specifics and give hard evidence of skills, abilities, and talents.

Choose professors, advisors, mentors, former bosses, former colleagues, etc. If you have management or leadership experience, you may want to include former employees or team members, who can talk about your management and leadership style. If you have sales or client-relations experience, list a client or two to address how you nurture client relationships.

Do not use personal references, such as family members, political connections, or your priest, unless there is a direct connection with that person and the organization considering you.

Bring this list to every interview in case you are asked for references. By having it preprinted on quality paper and in the same format as your other materials (resume, cover letter, personal statement), you will look polished and prepared.

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A FEW NOTES ON YOUR REFERENCES

1. Alert your Reference Team

Once you know that a company, organization, or program is about to check your references, call or e-mail each of your references and let them know about the opportunity. Your references can be strategic members of your selection process, if they have the right information. Here are some ideas of information to provide to your references:

• Tell each of them about the organization and the position, especially the skills this position is requiring.

• Remind them of the experiences you had that demonstrate the application of these skills.

• Use a couple of different examples with each reference. You do not want to sound like you fed answers to each reference.

• Let them know your long-term goals and how this position supports these goals.

• Give them any insight to the person who will be calling. Let him or her know if the person interviewing you is especially formal, casual, self-involved, etc. This allows your references to position their statements about you appropriately.

2. Follow-Up

Once you ask someone to be a reference you have involved him or her in the process. Show common courtesy by letting your references know the outcome, even if it is negative, of the process. You can do this by phone, thank you note (the preferred way), or e-mail. Typically your references care about you and your future, and are invested in the process with you. They want to help you celebrate your successes and support you during your disappointments.

3. Reference Letters

Many potential organizations and employers will ask for letters of recommendation. After you contact your references to get their commitments to help, provide them with a copy of the position or program description. Give your references the professional title, name, and address of the person to whom they should mail the letter, even if it will be e-mailed. Clearly state the due date for these letters (make this date a few days before the organi- zation needs it, just in case you need to scramble and get a different reference). Providing an addressed, stamped envelope is a professional gesture, if the letter is to be mailed.