



# Washington Headquarters Services Guide to Reference Checking



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## Introduction

Reference checking is a vital part of a successful hiring strategy and is primarily used to:

- Verify information provided by the candidate
- Better predict the candidate's on-the-job success
- Gain additional knowledge (e.g., candidate's abilities)
- Make better hiring decisions
- Improve the job-person match
- Improve assessment of training and experience
- Assess applicant honesty
- Demonstrate fairness and equal treatment

Reference checking aims to verify the information a candidate provided (e.g., resume) and can provide a different perspective. Both instances present a better picture to the hiring manager of how the candidate would perform on the job.

Reference checks are conducted once the applicant pool is narrowed down to the top candidate(s). For purposes of this guide, a "reference" is a person (e.g., supervisor, coworker, professor) whom the hiring manager or human resources (HR) specialist can talk with regarding the candidate's past performance.

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For additional information, please see *Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call*, U.S. Merit Systems and Protection Board, September, 2005 and *Reference Checking*, United States Office of Personnel Management, November, 2008.

## **Frequently Asked Questions about Reference Checks**

### **Who conducts the reference checks?**

Typically, the person who will be making the final hiring decision checks the top candidates' references.

### **How many references should be contacted?**

Contacting multiple references can be beneficial to gather different perspectives on a candidate's skills and abilities.

Typically, candidates provide three (3) references for the hiring manager to contact. If those references are not available, or if additional perspectives are desired, you can ask the candidate for additional references.

### **Who should serve as a reference?**

The reference should have been in a position to directly observe the candidate and be of a professional nature (previous or current supervisors, coworkers, professors, etc.) and not personal (friends, relatives, etc.).

References who have had the most recent contact with the candidate may be better able to provide specific and accurate feedback. Less recent references may not be aware of new skills the candidate may have developed. On the other hand, there may be circumstances where a less recent reference has the best knowledge of the competencies that are most important for the position to be filled. Accordingly, you will need to use judgment and weigh the information references provide appropriately to the situation.

### **Should I obtain a candidate's consent to check their references?**

Yes, when you ask a candidate to provide references, you should obtain their permission to contact their references. Consent can also be granted via language on the job application (e.g., a statement that all information provided by the candidate will be verified), the Declaration for Federal Employment form (OF-306) or a similar agency-developed form, or orally (e.g., during the interview).

### **What if the candidate asked not to contact their current supervisor?**

This is a common request (and is often an option within online staffing systems). One option is to ask if their current supervisor can be contacted once a tentative offer has been extended to the candidate.

If a candidate has asked their current supervisor not be contacted, ask the candidate to provide alternative references.

## **Developing Questions for References**

### **What should I consider when planning my questions?**

Develop questions relevant to the position under consideration. For example, if the position requires the candidate to adhere to strict guidelines, asking a reference about the candidate's ability to follow work procedures might be appropriate. Ensure questions are open-ended and based on behavior the references are likely to have observed.

Consider time constraints when deciding how many questions to ask. Consider how long it will take the references to answer the questions. Keep the list of questions to a manageable number.

## **Calling References**

### **How shall I contact references?**

The best way to contact a reference is usually by phone. When contacting the reference, briefly tell the reference who you are and why you are calling. Provide a brief overview of the position being filled and an estimate of how long the call will take. It may be helpful to let the reference know the candidate has given permission to have his or her references checked.

To ease into the conversation, begin with basic questions (e.g., reference's relation to the candidate, candidate's title and dates of employment), then move on to more in-depth questions.

### **What if the reference refuses to provide any information?**

Some agency (or company) policies do not allow the release of a previous employee's information. At a minimum, most will provide start and end dates and position titles. If you are not able to get the information you are seeking, you can ask the candidate to provide another reference.

### **Can I call references provided by the candidate's references?**

A reference provided by the candidate may, in turn, refer you to other individuals who can provide additional information. Asking the candidate for consent to contact the new references demonstrates consideration for the candidate.

### **What should reference checkers be particularly vigilant for?**

- Any indication that any of the applicant's claimed work history comes as a surprise to the reference provider
- Hesitations or changes in the reference provider's speaking patterns that indicate

- uncertainty or discomfort
- Slowness or seeming reluctance to respond to particular questions or confirm particular information
- Voice tremors or “canned” responses that may indicate fabrications

### **Handling Reference Information**

While checking references, it is possible the candidate may view a situation, interaction, or goal accomplishment differently than a reference. Consequently, some discrepancies may emerge. If you receive information differing from what the candidate said, it may be beneficial to allow the candidate an opportunity to clarify.

## **Suggested Reference Checking Steps**

### **Step 1**

- Develop questions for references (see sample questions)

### **Step 2**

- Inform candidates you will be checking their references and request permission if not already obtained (e.g., OF-306)
- Contact references
  - Briefly describe the position and the duties the candidate will perform
- Contact additional references, as applicable
- Clarify with the candidate any conflicting information received by references

### **Step 3**

- Evaluate results of reference checks
- Make hiring decision
- Ensure materials are stored and retained according to organization policy

## Sample Questions

- In what capacity did you work with the candidate (e.g., peer, colleague, supervisor)?
- Could you give me a brief description of the duties the candidate performed?
- What were the candidate's strengths? What were the candidate's weaknesses or areas where the candidate could improve?
- Would you recommend him/her for this position? Why or why not?
- How well did the candidate know the work? How well did the candidate perform on the job? How well did the candidate manage the workload?
- How would you describe the candidate's relationships with co-workers, subordinates, and supervisors?
- Is there anything else you can tell me about the candidate's ability to perform his/her job?
- What kind of work-related training, certificates, education, or other qualifications does the candidate have?
- What style of supervision have you found to be the most effective and how well does the candidate receive feedback?
- Did the candidate miss a lot of work? Was the candidate frequently late?
- Is there anything else you would like to add that is important for me to know?
- Is the candidate eligible for re-hire in your organization?