

# The Ultimate Guide to Reference Checking



REFNOW

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## WHAT IS REFERENCE CHECKING?

A reference check is when an employer or recruiter contacts key individuals from a candidate's previous workplace (such as supervisors and peers). The purpose is to both verify and obtain additional information and insight about the candidate's performance, skills, work styles and attitudes within different professional settings. This may include strengths, weaknesses, values, and any other comments or issues relevant to the role in question.

Reference checking not only ensures that a candidate's CV is a true reflection of their background, skills, and experience, but also helps employers and recruiters feel confident about whether or not the candidate meets the qualifications required for the position that they are seeking to fill. It is usually the last step of a recruitment process before an employer or recruiter formally decides whether or not to offer the job to a candidate.

Skeptics of reference checks view them as a time-consuming, and even a counterproductive process, since candidates usually only choose referees they feel will provide glowing assessments. Proponents of reference checks believe that they are less about getting the green light or a red flag from previous colleagues, and more about better understanding a candidate's strengths and weaknesses, in order to support them once they are in the role.





# **The basics of reference checking**



## TYPES OF REFEREES

A person who gives a reference by confirming details and/or providing a character assessment of a candidate is called a referee. Employers and recruiters usually collect references from referees via written methods such as e-mail or letter, or verbal methods such as a phone call.

There are different types of referees who employers and recruiters may contact, depending on the type of position in question. These include professional, personal, and backchannel (or backdoor) referees, each of which is examined below.

## PROFESSIONAL REFEREES

With the exception of Human Resource departments and third-party agency recruiters, professional referees are usually previous employers and peers who have worked with the candidate in a professional setting. This gives them the ability to vouch for the candidate's qualifications, experience, and overall suitability for a job.

Previous colleagues not only confirm basic details of a job candidate, but can also provide insightful, and often invaluable, character assessments of said candidate within a professional context.





## PERSONAL REFEREES

Personal referees are people who can provide a personal reference about a candidate, based on knowing the candidate in a personal setting.

They usually won't have worked with the candidate in a professional context. While personal references tend to hold less weight than professional references, employers and recruiters may rely on these in relation to candidates with no prior work experience, such as school leavers or new university graduates.

## BACKCHANNEL/ BACKDOOR REFEREES

Backchannel or backdoor referees are the most informal type of referee who the candidate has not personally declared a referee themselves.

This type of referee is one who the employer or recruiter has found themselves through mutual connections within a company, or through social media channels such as LinkedIn.

The employer or recruiter may contact these backchannel referees to discuss the job candidate's suitability for the role they're looking to fill.

# **What employers need to know about reference checking**



***Although employers and recruiters claim to consider reference checking a vital step in the recruitment process, many actually forgo the whole process because they view it as a time-consuming and even counterproductive formality that doesn't add to the information they already know.***

***When done correctly, reference checking can provide a number of benefits and advantages for employers and recruiters during the hiring process, such as:***



Compliance and evidence of due diligence, indicating that they took necessary and reasonable steps to confirm facts, details, and issues about a candidate before entering into a contract with them.



Additional evaluation and screening that ensures the candidate's details, skills, and experiences match or exceed what's on file.



Improved onboarding and performance management processes. Employers can use the information gleaned from the new employee's references to determine the types of skills to leverage, as well as identifying the types of environments in which the employee is most likely to successfully contribute to the company.



It is also important for employers and recruiters to be aware of the reality that a disconcertingly high number of people lie or provide misleading information on their CVs. For instance, research by Cifas, the UK's leading fraud prevention service, revealed that 1 in 12 Brits have lied about the qualifications on their CV. Unnervingly, they also found that 1 in 5 young Brits between the ages of 16-24 view this type of fraud as a 'reasonable' thing to commit.



## QUESTIONS TO ASK REFEREES

The basic questions during referencing checks concern the factual details stated on the candidate's CV, such as job titles, dates in each role and the duties carried out.

Detailed, open-ended questions focusing on skills, experience, and character traits such as reliability, integrity, punctuality, adaptability, and ability to manage stress and high-pressure environments, can provide good insight to the employer or recruiter in terms of how well the job candidate would fill the new role and fit with the company's culture.



Examples of these types of questions include:

- What type of environments did the candidate thrive in at your company?
- Which three words best describe how the candidate worked in your company?
- Did the candidate ever experience a notable upward or downward trajectory while working at your company, and if so, why?
- What are the candidate's main strengths and/or biggest achievements?
- What are the candidate's areas for improvement, if any?
- How would colleagues and clients describe the relationships they had with the candidate?

# **What candidates need to know about reference checking**



***Job seekers may view an employer's or recruiter's need to reference check with some trepidation. The whole process focuses solely on the candidates themselves but is in many ways out of their control!***

***Taking the mystery out of reference checking by exploring the range of options available during the recruitment process can help.***

***Reassuring the candidate about what to expect can help calm any nerves and increase feelings of confidence and control.***



## **DETERMINING THE RIGHT REFEREES**

Since employers and recruiters are primarily interested in your professional employment history, ideal referees are people that you've worked for in a professional capacity, such as previous managers or supervisors. Such referees can not only verify the work experience and skills stated on your CV, but can also provide employers and recruiters with valuable and real human insight regarding your professional characteristics, talents, and achievements.

Colleagues that you've worked closely with can also provide valuable references. While personal referees such as family and friends are certain to give your recruiter glowing reports about your character, their references ultimately do not hold as much weight as professional ones.

It is much better, particularly if you do not have any prior professional work experience, to ask a teacher, professor, or community leader who knows you and your work well and with whom you enjoy a good relationship to provide the necessary references.

## HOW TO ASK PROSPECTIVE PEOPLE TO BE YOUR REFEREES

You should always ask before using someone as a referee, so they can expect to be contacted and be prepared to answer appropriately. Ideally make your request in writing, so they have time to consider it, and do so in a polite and gracious manner!

Depending on how recently you've worked together, you might want to remind them about when you worked together, including any successful projects you collaborated on. Attaching your current CV may also be an effective way of refreshing your prospective referee's memory of you and your capabilities.

Have your referees also give their consent through written format, and remember to thank them for their time and assistance.

## REFERENCES ON FILE: TO VIEW OR NOT TO VIEW

Since they are considered part of an individual's personal data, citizens of the UK and the EU have a right to access their references, acquired either through written or verbal means, for free by asking the appropriate department in the company.

Note that this legal obligation for reference disclosure may or may not extend to other countries beyond the UK and EU.

It is important to note that references are not strictly confidential and may circulate among the relevant parties within a company.



# What referees need to know about reference checking



***Professional and personal referees may have a number of practical and legal issues to consider before and during the process of giving assessments about job candidates. It is important to be aware of what to say, what to avoid saying, and the types of questions employers or recruiters can and can't ask of you.***

## **HOW TO RESPOND TO REFERENCE REQUESTS**

After agreeing to provide a reference for somebody it's best to complete it as soon as possible as the person you are writing it for may require it before they can be accepted for the role (there are certain sectors where it's a legal requirement to check references first such as education and healthcare).

Some requests may come in the form of asking you to download and complete a word processing document, and more modern requests (such as those sent using [RefNow](#)) will allow you to complete the request using an online form, which you can easily complete using your mobile device or computer.

## **WHAT TO SAY IN YOUR REFERENCE**

The key to providing good, even great references, is to be honest, fair, and accurate to the best of your ability. If your assessment of the current job candidate is positive, be sure to provide examples that firmly and clearly demonstrate the candidate's strengths, talents, and achievements.

Demonstrating the candidate's strengths in relation to other colleagues is also a bonus. It is also helpful to balance glowing reports of the candidate with some mention of areas for improvement and advice for prospective employers regarding environments, situations, and management styles in which the candidate thrives, as well as struggles.



## WHAT NOT TO SAY IN YOUR REFERENCE

Referees should avoid at all costs deliberately providing false or misleading information about a candidate.

Information that negatively impacts a candidate's prospects for employment such as disciplinary actions, or termination are appropriate and particularly crucial to mention— providing they are true and stated impartially, without prejudice or discrimination.

Job candidates are legally allowed to view their references as they are considered their personal data as much as they are the referee's. Referees can face legal repercussions if candidates feel that the information in their reference is in any way false, misleading, prejudicial, or discriminatory.

## WHAT EMPLOYERS AND RECRUITERS ARE ALLOWED TO ASK WHEN CHECKING REFERENCES

At the most basic level, you'll be asked to confirm factual information about the candidate in question, such as job title, dates and hours worked, and perhaps duties and responsibilities listed on the CV.

Some employers and recruiters will go the extra mile and delve into the candidate's skills, strengths, weaknesses, values, demonstrated achievements, and character traits within various professional contexts as a way to inform hiring and onboarding processes.

Employers and recruiters are not legally allowed to ask questions about the personal lives of candidates, such as their marital status, number of children, or level of attractiveness. Asking such questions may lead to legal repercussions for the employers and recruiters asking, as well as for referees who answer.



# Conclusion



A successful recruitment process depends on the cooperation and collaboration of employers and recruiters, job candidates, and referees. The steps involved in the recruitment process don't need to be mysterious or ignored due to some negative perceptions. Rather they should positively evolve alongside the ever-changing expectations of work and society.

When done correctly, reference checks can provide a number of benefits for all parties involved. These include saving time and money, reducing uncertainty, and offering valuable insight to inform hiring and onboarding decisions.

They can also provide candidates with opportunities for reflection and reconnection with former colleagues, and allow referees the chance to help promote deserving candidates further on in their career.

## **AUTOMATE YOUR REFERENCE CHECKS WITH**

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