Manager’s Guide to Reference Checks

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The guide should be used to learn about completing reference checks.

Introduction

Reference checks are a critical part of the assessment process and should not be considered simply a formality. In fact, they might be the most important assessment tool because they provide information regarding behaviours that have been observed first hand, in relation to the competency requirements. Reference checks may confirm and validate, or question preliminary evaluation results from interviews/exercises, which help give a more fulsome evaluation.

The process is intended to identify trends or ongoing patterns of behaviour, to help predict future behaviour, rather than draw conclusions from a single specific action. One example of one behaviour that happened one time does not necessarily mean that is likely to occur on an ongoing basis. That’s why it is important to check with several referees, to cover different times, different situations, and look for those trends or patterns. The more longstanding, frequent and recent the behaviour, the more likely it will be to continue.

Which References to Check?

Hiring managers sometimes think they can check only the references the candidate provides. While that may be appropriate, it depends on who they are, which may not be evident just by looking at names on their list. That’s why, at the end of the interview, **it is important to go through each name on the candidate’s list** of references with them, and **ask about the relationship, how long ago it was and what the context was, to determine relevance.**

References should be based on:

- Relationship – direct supervisory relationship is typically the best
- Currency – typically, the more current/recent, the better
- Context or relevance – the closer the context to that of the position being filled, the better
    - E.g. If you are staffing a client service rep position, a reference relating to a call centre job might be more relevant, in terms of competencies, than one relating to a night shift security guard.

As a rule, when you go through the list of referees with a candidate, you should line that up with the jobs on their resume, starting with the current one, working your way back. If they are missing some, ask for and get contact information, even if you won’t necessarily be talking with them. Having the candidate explain who their referees are, in terms of relationship, currency, and context or relevance, can better determine how to “weigh” their comments, relative to each other, because not all references are equal.

Occasionally, someone will not include their current supervisor because they haven’t told them they are looking for a job. In those cases, and depending on relevance, you may tell the candidate that if you get to the point of considering them further, you will contact the candidate and give them the opportunity to give their supervisor a heads-up first. That approach generally also works if they do not want you contacting anybody beyond the names they have given you.

Sometimes, even if you are the hiring manager for a competition, your name is included in the list of references provided by a candidate, or you have been in a position to provide a reference. This is not a conflict of interest. In fact, depending on the relationship, currency, and context, you, as the hiring manager/supervisor, might be the most appropriate referee, and it would be wrong not to provide a reference.

“Global” References

When you go through the list of references with the candidate, other names might come up. There may also be other people that you need or want to contact, based on the candidate’s experience, whose names were not provided. These are sometimes called “global references”.

That might come up, for example, when one reference suggests you speak with someone else who might have more pertinent information to provide. Note that **you do not need the candidate’s permission** to check those. It is strongly recommended though, in the discussion with the candidate after the interview, that you inform them of the possibility that you may need to contact others.

How Many Reference Checks?

There is no rule about the number of reference checks you must do. It depends on the relationship, currency and context of the references. Typically, checking with three or four references is sufficient, but you may need to check with more to ensure all competencies are covered or to clearly establish an ongoing pattern of behaviour. Conversely, you may need to check with fewer if, for example, the candidate has been in the same job, reporting to the same person for the last five years, and it is the most relevant contextually to the job you are staffing. In that situation, it may even be reasonable to check with only one reference.

Process

Once you have determined which references you want to check, it is advisable to schedule a telephone meeting with them, so they have time to prepare. Sending the questions out in advance may also be helpful.

While it might seem more efficient to ask them to fill out the reference check form in writing, that is much less effective because it provides no opportunity for follow-up and you miss out on important verbal cues that otherwise might prompt further questions.

In preparation for your reference checks, use the Reference Check Guide template to customize the questions using the competency requirements for the position you are staffing.

Confidentiality Statement

The first part of the guide includes an introductory statement, followed by a statement about confidentiality. It is important to read that to each referee and sign below it. That relates to Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy legislation, which protects this information. The statement is as follows:

> *"The evaluations and opinions contained in the reference provided regarding the suitability, eligibility and qualifications of the candidate for a position in the Saskatchewan Public Service, will be kept in confidence by the Employer unless disclosure of same is required by law, legal or grievance proceedings."*

Standard Reference Questions

These questions are geared to providing you with the appropriate context surrounding the reference information, in terms of relationship, currency and context/relevance.

- Could you tell me the dates ____________ was with your organization?
- What was your relationship to ____________? Did you complete ____________’s performance appraisals?
- What type of work did ____________ do? What was ____________’s job title?
- How would you compare ____________’s work to the work of others who performed the same job?

Overview of the Job

The next part is to provide an overview of the position being staffed. That puts your questions and competency requirements in the appropriate context for the referee, so they have a sense of what you are talking and asking about.

- The position being staffed is a … that is responsible for…
- Our branch/division mandate is to…
- We deal with… Our clients are… Our stakeholders are…
- Whatever else may be pertinent.
    - E.g. If you're checking references with your candidate's former supervisor at a fast food restaurant and asking about problem-solving skills, the supervisor might say the candidate has really good problem-solving skills, because they are thinking that the candidate always knows what to do when she's running low on supplies. But if the supervisor knew you were talking about a job as a Child Protection Worker who might have to apprehend children at risk, they might put a caveat around their reference because the kinds of problems are significantly different.

In terms of context, you need to know what *they* are talking about, and they need to know what *you* are asking about. That will help you make sense of what they tell you, put it into context and "weigh" it accordingly, relative to other reference information, as you look for trends.

Competency-related Questions

The next series of questions are the ones you customize or tailor according to the competency requirements for your vacancy. The format of reference check questions is basically "Here's the competency. This is the context. Tell me what your opinion is, based on what you've seen."

Here are three versions of that format, with a specific competency statement italicized:

- This position requires the *ability to plan and organize a large volume of work taking into consideration frequent interruptions, and conflicting and changing priorities to meet tight deadlines.* (Give examples if required.) Based on your observations, please comment on ____________'s ability to do this. Provide examples.
- The position requires the incumbent *to create an environment that recognizes, supports, respects and welcomes diversity of employees and clients.* Have you observed ____________ demonstrate this competency? In what context? What were your observations?
- In this job, the incumbent requires *knowledge of court and legal processes and procedures.* Please comment on ____________'s knowledge in this area and how/where you have seen him demonstrate that knowledge.

It is important throughout the reference check, that you ask probing questions to fully understand the comments, what they are based on, and what the context was. Sometimes referees give vague or general answers but don't give much substance. In order to identify an ongoing pattern of behaviour, you need to have that, so keep asking questions to get it.

It is also important to write down verbatim the reference information that is provided to you, so that you can recall it later when you do your overall evaluation, as further evidence to support your selection decision.

Wrap-Up

The last part of the reference check is the wrap-up. These are the general summary questions about the candidate. The last few questions about whether the referee would rehire the candidate or if there is anything more to add, often provides good information and a more accurate and complete picture of what the referee thinks. These are sometimes the questions that provide the best information.

- What would you say are ____________’s strengths?
- We all have areas we need to improve. What would you say are ____________’s development needs?
- Why did ____________ leave your organization? (if applicable)
- Would you rehire ____________? If not, why not?
- Is there anything more you wish to add?
- Is there anyone else I should talk to for more information about ____________?

With these questions too, you may want to ask probing questions to more fully understand the comments.

After Reference Checks

After checking with the most appropriate people, review the information collected from all reference checks, considering relevance. Identify ongoing patterns or trends for each competency.

The evaluation of reference checks is not mathematical. If you check four references and only three are good, that doesn’t necessarily say that overall, it’s good, because it depends on who they all are, based on relationship, currency and context.

Compare the reference check results against the preliminary ratings (Pass/Fail or scores) identified on the Candidate Evaluation Summary form. Adjust the competency ratings on the Candidate Evaluation Summary, if necessary, to document the final results, based on holistic evaluation.

Issues

On occasion, you might come across a reference whose employer has a policy which prohibits them from divulging any information beyond dates of employment. Most often, by asking a few more questions, you can still obtain at least some information indicating whether or not it was a successful employment experience or they might suggest the name of someone who can provide a reference. If, in fact, you are unable to get anything beyond dates from a particular employer, it is highly unlikely that all the candidate’s references will be in the same situation, in which case, you may want to expand your search for references.