Reference Checking Guidelines and Tips

Hiring the best employees is one of the most important responsibilities managers have at the University of Idaho. Our employees perform critical work for our students and Idaho citizens. We look for employees who not only meet the job requirements and can further our mission, goals and promote our values, but have the potential to exceed our expectations and grow within our institution. Checking references is a crucial step in this process. Effective reference checking should give you added assurance that the intuitive sense you have about an applicant's abilities to successfully perform in the position are well-founded or… correct your perceptions and spare you potential headaches.

The Purpose of Checking References is to…

• Gain insight into the perception of the applicants previous employers regarding the applicant's previous job-related behavior.

• Validate the accuracy of the information on the application and resume.

• Validate or clarify information provided by the applicant during the interview.

• Gain information that may be useful in managing or motivating this person in the future.

• Help protect the University in a number of ways including from a negligent hiring claim.

Tips for Completing Reference Checks

• Some employers will not provide reference checks without a signed release from the applicant.

• Questions must be job-related and designed to gain insight into an applicant's prior work history, work habits and behaviors that impact work performance. Just as you do for interview questions, avoid any personal questions that could be interpreted as asking about something in a protected category. For example, asking simply about attendance leaves open the possibility that you will get information about excessive absences that are protected by law. Instead, you can ask, "How was the attendance excluding any missed work protected by law?"

• Contact individuals who can provide the most relevant information to job-related questions.

  - o Former supervisors should be the primary focus. If an employee does not list a former supervisor, this is a red-flag that should be explored. Tell the candidates that we will likely be calling prior supervisors and not just the individuals listed as references.
  - o HR strongly recommends always talking to the current supervisor. Sometimes applicants ask us to not contact current supervisor prior to letting the applicant know. Honor this request and give the applicant

enough time to let the current supervisor know the call is coming. In this situation, you may want to check this reference last, even after the criminal background check, once you are confident that the applicant is a viable candidate for the job. If an applicant is adamant about not contacting the current supervisor, explore the reason why with the applicant. Before agreeing to not contact this individual, contact your business partner in HR.

- Former or current subordinates of the applicant are a good source of information if you are looking to hire a supervisor.
- HR recommends talking to supervisors first and contacting co-workers, peers, stakeholders or personal references if there are an insufficient number of supervisors – which may happen for people relatively new to the workforce.

• Appropriate questions are those that focus on successful job performance and workplace conduct. These include skills needed to do the job, interpersonal relationship skills, quality of work, amount of work performed, ability to follow directions, judgment, timeliness, accuracy, attendance, management or supervisory skills (if part of the job), ability to respond to supervision, criticism or correction, and confirmation of information provided on the application or during the interview.

• <u>Tips for "Getting Through" to References when they Cite "Company Policy."</u>

- Don't give up. It's too important. Push through the resistance.
- Explain that the reference is a key contact and that we may not be able to consider the applicant further without their help. If that doesn't work…
- Express your appreciation for their position or their company policy and ask if they can answer whether or not they would rehire the person. Listen carefully to "how" they respond as that can give you clues. Ask if there is anyone else at the organization to whom you can speak about this. Ask if there is anything else that they are permitted to tell you.
- Contact the applicant and tell them they are a finalist, but that you cannot proceed unless you reach enough of the right contact people for their reference checks. Ask the applicant for additional names or to help a key reference open up to us. Former supervisors are preferred. Colleagues and subordinates are less favorable but may be necessary. Don't hesitate to ask the applicant to help facilitate getting the information you need.

Reference Check Process

• Generally, you need only check the references for your top finalist. If you are undecided or have two or more equally well-matched finalists, check the references on each of them.

• Use the Telephone Reference Check Form recently updated by HR. It's located on the HR webpage under Managers -> Recruitment.

• How many references? Ideally, speak to supervisors covering work for the prior 7-10 years AND, no fewer than three references.

• Giving the applicant a courtesy call to let him or her know that we are going to check references is a nice touch. Remember, we are trying to represent the University as an "employer of choice" and this is a courtesy that will reflect well on you and on the University.

• Once you reach a reference, introduce yourself and state that you would like to ask a few questions to validate what you have learned about the applicant's qualifications. Ask whether this is a good time to engage in a discussion or whether you should call back at a more convenient time. Briefly describe the job in question. Avoid sharing your thoughts about the applicant as those will likely get back to that person.

• Always ask about the reason for leaving. You will be surprised how often it varies from what the applicant wrote or told you. Investigate and reconcile discrepancies.

• Always verify dates of employment – look for gaps that don't add up or were not explained in the interview.

• Review the finalist's application and the notes taken during this person's interview. (One good technique in reference checking is to rephrase some or all of the same questions you asked in the interview and pose them to applicant's former employer. For example: "What was the worst professional mistake this person made while working for you and how did they recover?") HR encourages you to verify relevant information from the application materials and interview(s), especially if you have concerns. Ask about time gaps in employment and verify dates of employment.

• Ask the tough questions. You must ask probing and sometimes awkward questions. You are safe to do so as long as the questions are job-related and non-discriminatory. Negligent hiring suits are increasing in number – many of which could be avoided by thorough reference checks. Always ask if the applicant has ever violated company policy. This is especially important if the applicant was involved in sexual harassment, discrimination, fraud, theft or workplace violence.

• Be wary of that "perfect" employee. There is no such thing. Probe a little. Ask questions like "If you had to choose one aspect of the applicant's job performance that you would have liked to have seen improve, what would it be?" Then pause long enough for them to answer.

• Ask follow up questions. We encourage you to probe with questions like "Can you give me an example?" or "Can you please elaborate?"

• Respect confidentiality. Communicate what you learn only to those with a legitimate business need to know.

• Please carefully and thoroughly document the responses to your questions. Use the two-page Telephone Reference Check Form on HR's website. Document exactly what you hear but do not add your perceptions or impressions. This documentation becomes part of the recruiting file and is subject to discovery or release to the public. However, your perceptions are important and you should discuss them with your supervisor and HR if you have any concerns.

• It is very important that the **person conducting the reference checks be very familiar with the job, the selection criteria, the application materials and the interview**

responses. Usually this is the hiring manager. We also recommend having one person conduct all the reference checks for consistency and quality.

- Regarding Seeking References Outside of Those Provided
  - HR strongly encourages you to not contact anyone other than those in an official capacity to provide job performance-related information. Although not illegal to do so, the potential exists to put the applicant in an awkward or untenable situation. The applicant may want references of the current employer handled delicately and at the end of the process. "Unofficial" references may not be aware of exit or other legal agreements. The risk of souring a relationship with someone we want to hire probably does not outweigh the benefit of what we could learn and subsequently verify. You are always welcome to ask the applicant for additional official references.

  - Please convey this to your entire interviewing panel as they sometimes take it upon themselves to make calls.

  - If you do want to go beyond the references provided in the application materials at the interview, it is a professional courtesy and a good practice to let the applicant know and give them an opportunity to communicate any concerns or suggestions.

Updated May 31, 2017