REFERENCE CHECK GUIDE

5. Conduct Reference Checks

Hiring an employee is one of the most important and potentially costly decisions a manager will make. Checking references is the last and critical step before making a hiring determination. This guide outlines the rationale behind the process and offers guidelines you can follow as you move through the process. If you have any questions there are not contemplated in this guide, please contact your HR Consultant.

Purpose

Conducting reference checks is based on the principal that past behavior is a good indicator of future behavior. The purpose of checking references is to determine whether information gathered through the selection process is accurate and factual.

If you hire a candidate without completing a thorough reference check, the result may be an employee who does not have the required skills for the position, which may impact their ability to perform at the required level. This may lead to time-consuming and challenging performance improvement interventions that may result in the employee’s failure of probation, forcing you to start the hiring process from the beginning.

Legal Considerations

It is critical to obtain the candidate’s agreement before checking references. If the candidate includes references in a resume or has otherwise provided them in writing to you (either in interview or by e-mail,) agreement is implicit. Do not accept contact information for references verbally.

Any information collected during the reference checks must be kept confidential, and must not be shared with anyone other than your HR Consultant or hiring committee.

Certain questions cannot be asked during reference checks. At no time are you permitted to pose questions that may elicit information connected with any of the protected characteristics, as prescribed under the Manitoba Human Rights Code, including:

- age
- marital status
- family status (i.e. whether he or she has or plans to have children)
- ethnic origins
- race or colour
- religion
- size or weight
- disabilities
- health or medical matters
- sexual orientation
Checking the References

The validity of reference checks are enhanced when:

- the candidate’s previous or immediate supervisor provides the reference and the supervisor has had adequate time to observe the candidate’s performance; the old and new jobs are similar in content.
- the reference supervised the candidate recently.

In accordance with University of Manitoba Policy and Procedures on Employment of Support Staff, the chair or hiring authority of the hiring committee shall be responsible for ensuring a minimum of two (2) appropriate references are checked and completed.

Process

1. Collect reference names

Ask the candidate to provide in writing two (2) references; including their current supervisor (ensure exclude family-member supervisors.) For leadership positions, you can request colleague or direct-report references to gain a broader perspective on the candidate. If you are unsatisfied with the list of references provided, you are not required to accept those contacts. You may ask for alternate contact names, such a previous supervisor or a customer. If the candidate is still not prepared to fulfil your request for additional references, you make take this into consideration when making your final hiring decision.

Candidates who have not told their supervisor that they are potentially considering other employment may be reluctant to provide that name as a reference. You can start checking the other references and indicate that you will contact the current supervisor only when you are ready to make a job offer conditional upon the reference being complete and positive. Confirm the candidate agrees with this approach.

You must always check two (2) references, where possible. Multiple references are preferable, allowing you to look for consistency and to ensure you have exercised due care in carrying out a full assessment of your preferred candidate.

2. Contact references

When you check references, ask questions related to the job in question. We encourage you to use the Reference Check Questionnaire.

3. Information sharing

If you have any questions about the reference-check process, including how and to whom you may share information collected from references, be sure to contact your HR Consultant.
Potential Challenges and Solutions

The Person You Call Is Hesitant About Giving a Reference:

- References may hesitate to provide a reference because they are concerned about legal implications.
- You can reassure them by explaining that you want to be fair to the candidate who provided their contact information and is aware that you are contacting them.

You Receive an Evasive Answer:

- Often, when people want to either avoid or are not comfortable answering a question, they will answer evasively or change the direction of the conversation by going off topic. For example, if you were to ask: “How would you describe the candidate’s management skills? Please provide me with a specific example?” and the reference responds “This employee never thought twice about helping others and working overtime.”
- When this happens, be sure to re-direct the reference back to the question and to probe further until you are satisfied that the reference has answered the question fully.

You Receive Negative Information from A Reference:

- An unfavorable reference may indeed be an indication that there are some legitimate concerns to consider in terms of the candidate’s fit for the position.
- However, you may want to consider the reference’s motivation for providing the unfavorable reference and ensure that you are obtaining examples and evidence that supports the information.
- If you receive a negative reference, try to validate the information by asking the other references the same question, thereby establishing a possible pattern of behavior.
- If a pattern of the particular behavior becomes a common theme from other references, you will need to explore how relevant the issue is to the position you are hiring for and whether this impacts your hiring decision.
- If the other references are positive, you can ask the candidate for an additional reference in order to corroborate the positive information.

The Reference You Are Trying to Reach Does Not Return Your Calls:

- Attempt to connect with the reference by email to set up a date according to their availability.
- You can ask the candidate to speak to this reference about the need to get back to you.
- If you still cannot reach the reference, try to obtain other references in the same organization to gather the appropriate information.
The First Reference Is Outstanding, So You Decide Not to Pursue Further References:

- You run the risk of having landed on a reference who may have had a positive experience in that context, but other references not contacted had a different experience with the candidate. You might also have found a reference who did not want to penalize an employee who is very popular with colleagues (even if somewhat incompetent), and thought that a positive reference would help. In both cases, you may end up with an employee who is a poor fit.

You Must Fill the Position Quickly So, Without Realizing It, You Pose Leading Questions That Prompt a Positive Response

- For example, you ask “Do you think this person could do this job?” This question is rather general and usually prompts a positive response, especially because it can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” and leaves little room for a more in-depth answer. Always use open-ended questions.
- If you are in a hurry to fill the position, you might also, without realizing it, interpret general answers as positive rather than probing further.
- Even if you have an urgent need to fill a position, take the reference check process seriously. Your problems will only worsen if you hire an unqualified candidate.

Examples of Additional Reference Questions

The Manager’s Toolkit: Reference Check Questionnaire includes essential questions to ask (section A), plus additional questions (section B). The below are additional reference questions that you can use for section B. Remember to always pose open-ended questions and ask for examples where appropriate:

- Describe the candidate’s financial responsibilities.
- Describe the candidate’s writing skills.
- How did/does the candidate function under pressure?
- Can you provide an example of the way in which the candidate has shown initiative?
- Would you describe the candidate as a leader with vision, and why?
- Do you consider the candidate to be a good communicator, and why?
- Can the candidate influence others effectively, particularly those over whom he/she has no authority? Give an example of a situation in which the candidate showed this kind of skill.
- Give an example of a project managed by the candidate. Tell us how he or she developed a vision, managed communications and pulled the team together.
- Describe the candidate’s ability to work in a crisis or an emergency.
- Describe the candidate’s ability to adapt to change.
- Has the candidate had the opportunity to train others and foster commitment and productivity? Describe how.
- Describe how the candidate was able to negotiate with partners and reach an agreement.
• Can I read you an extract from the candidate’s resume describing the work he or she did for you and ask you for your comments?

If you have any questions about this process, please contact your HR Consultant.