



# The Reference Process Demystified

The people you identify as references in your job search act as your ambassadors to a potential employer. Choosing references who can paint a clear picture of your strengths and potential can be a decisive advantage in your employment campaign.

**LISA L. WALKER\***  
KORN/FERRY INTERNATIONAL

**Y**ou are considering a new job opportunity and have been interviewed by several members of the hiring company's management team. The chemistry is good. You've taken a competency assessment (discussed in the Dec. 2009 issue of *CEP*, pp. 27–28), and are a finalist candidate. By all indications, it is a great fit.

However, to validate this, another step remains: the crucial process of reference checking.

On the surface, references might seem to be the least influential component in a job search — less so than experience and expertise, for example. But in truth, managing references is more important than most people realize. References must be selected with care and prepared thoroughly for their role in your employment search. An unfavorable reference can undermine an otherwise promising job candidacy — especially in today's competitive, cautious employment environment, where a company's focus is on hiring employees with impeccable integrity and people skills.

Understanding how recruiters use references can help you choose and prepare the most appropriate people to speak about you as a person and as a professional. This article explores how to manage the referral process, and how this can help you to protect your reputation at this critical stage of your job hunt.

## Selecting your ambassadors

Your references — taken together — should provide a 360-degree perspective of your work style, management skills and business acumen. When choosing these personal

ambassadors, the first thing to consider is who among your former colleagues, business contacts and social connections can provide the most relevant testimonials in terms of the specific job for which you are vying. At a minimum, three people are likely to be questioned about your history, although an employer might ask for more than three references. For a management position, it is common for a recruiter to ask for six references: two supervisors, two peers, and two subordinates. Often, a customer or supplier can offer additional insight as well.

Select people with whom you have worked extensively over a period of at least two to three years whenever possible. If you are gainfully employed, your references must be people the recruiter can speak to in confidence without jeopardizing your current circumstance. With regard to past employers, be prepared to give the name of your boss and even your boss' boss. In instances where you have been let go from a previous job, the person who laid you off can sometimes be used as a reference; a recruiter will want to know their side of the story and then make sure there is no disconnect.

As you consider potential references, keep in mind:

1. In order to probe areas where the hiring organization might have misgivings or concerns, the recruiter will ask the reference for factual information and specifics about how you demonstrated certain skills.

2. Each reference might also be asked for the name of another person with whom the recruiter can further discuss your candidacy.

Take time to brief your references about their role in

\* Lisa L. Walker is now with Leadership Capital Advisors ([lisa.walker@L-C-A.com](mailto:lisa.walker@L-C-A.com))

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your job search; do not let them be cold-called for this serious conversation. An experienced recruiter will first ask references whether they have a clear understanding of the position and will outline what they are looking for in terms of a candidate’s ability to perform.

In the case of leadership positions, the reference should be willing to spend 30–45 minutes with the recruiter to thoroughly work through a set of questions tailored for the specific circumstances of the job. Many times, a reference’s resistance to spending more than a few minutes on a phone call also reflects an unwillingness (or inability) to say very much that is positive.

### The reference contact

Reference checks can be conducted directly by the hiring manager, by the human resources department, or by an external recruiter, but the process and questions will be the same. It is not unusual for a candidate’s references to be divided among several individuals to speed the process and share opinions on the candidate. So, when you prepare your references, let them know that a representative from the company or recruiting firm will be contacting them, although you might not know who that specific person will be.

### Back-channel referencing

The references that you assemble and present might not be the only references that are checked.

*Peer to peer.* When hiring upper management, recruiters pre-qualify candidates by speaking to their peers within the field. This enables them to approach a candidate and say, “I have spent a fair amount of time talking to people who think highly of you and believe you need to take this opportunity seriously.” It also lets them go to the hiring company with an overview of what they have heard when they first present you as a possible candidate.

*“The Google.”* In the reference process, recruiters and hiring managers might look in the public domain as well — doing a check of blogs, social networking sites, news media sites, and publications to familiarize themselves with you. For this reason, it is a good idea to be aware of — and, if possible, manage — what information is available about you on the Internet.

*Personal networks.* Recruiters and employers will often use their own personal networks in the referencing process.

### ANTICIPATING THE QUESTIONS

The questions asked of references are similar to those that are posed to the job candidates themselves, and span both strengths and areas for development. Each reference is not expected to comment on the candidate’s capabilities in every area. This is another reason for a broad selection of references that includes supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers and suppliers. References should be prepared to respond to inquiries such as:

- When I say the candidate’s name, what thoughts come to mind?
- What was the candidate’s biggest accomplishment while working for your company?
- Tell me about a challenge the candidate faced. How did he/she handle it? What was the result?
- Describe the candidate’s technical skills.
- Describe how he/she builds relationships across different functions.
- Discuss the candidate’s communication style.
- How does the candidate stay abreast of best practices or trends in the field?
- Discuss the candidate’s team management style and skills.
- Is there any type of individual he/she does not get along with?
- How would you characterize the candidate’s leadership style?
- How does he/she react in stressful situations?
- What motivates the candidate to succeed?
- In what environment is he/she most effective?
- What opportunities for development exist for the candidate?
- Discuss the candidate’s ethics.
- Why did the candidate leave your company?
- Would you hire the candidate again?
- Is there anything we have not mentioned that a prospective employer would want to know?
- What advice can you give regarding a good mentor for the candidate?

In our ever-more-interconnected world, it is not uncommon that you may have worked with someone who the recruiter or hiring manager knows personally.

These approaches allow employers to get a “back-channel” reference on you from an individual they already know and trust. Indeed, these references are often considered to be the most credible and authentic.

Do not be surprised or intimidated if such referencing happens during the process. If you have been transparent in stating your skills, these references can often be a powerful endorsement. If unfavorable information is discovered through a back-channel reference, hiring managers and recruiters will seek to understand the circumstances, context, and prevalence of the remarks.

## Unfavorable references

Most references are positive. When a negative or defamatory comment is proffered by a reference, the recruiter will scrutinize such statements, looking carefully at:

- how objective the information is
- how certain the reference is about the information
- how many references mentioned the issue
- whether there is any way to confirm the information.

It is the recruiter's job to recognize the difference between show-stopping concerns, such as ethics violations or sexual harassment, and reports of style conflicts. Such feedback also will be viewed in context, taking into account where the reference comes from and the circumstances under which the reference worked with the candidate.

## Final thoughts

Once the conversations with your references have been completed, a summary of these third-party observations about your appropriateness for the job will be prepared and reviewed. If you are not selected for a role due specifically to what was uncovered during the reference check, you will typically be informed of this.

As is the case throughout the job hunt, a strong sense of self-awareness will help you avoid surprises. Anticipating and discussing any negative perceptions that might exist about you with a recruiter beforehand, and demonstrating lessons learned, will help the employer to keep unfavorable comments in context.

Trusting your references to be fair and honest while helping them to understand why you are pursuing a particular opportunity will go a long way toward letting your reputation speak for itself. This will enable the recruiter and the prospective employer to confirm that you are the best person for the job.

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**LISA L. WALKER** is a senior client partner at Korn/Ferry International (Chicago, IL; Phone: (312) 526-0580; E-mail: [lisa.walker@kornferry.com](mailto:lisa.walker@kornferry.com)), where she leads the firm's sustainability and agribusiness practices. With two decades of experience in executive search and senior roles within the industrial marketplace, she leads searches for clients seeking marketing, strategy, business development, technology, and operations expertise. Prior to entering executive search, she was chief marketing officer with BP PLC, Air BP, managing all marketing aspects of the international jet fuel business. She also worked with Amoco Corp. as director of strategic planning and director of marketing strategy. An AIChE member, Walker earned a BS in chemical engineering from Cornell Univ. and an MBA in finance and economics from the Univ. of Chicago.