



The Overwhelming, Can't Be Overstated, and Undeniable Importance of References

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You were so "on" during the interview. Everything just clicked. You've got this job sewn up, no doubt. Everything looks great, they just need to check references.

Just check the references.

As you spent hours creating the perfect resume, code samples, or demo reel, and as you lovingly edited and tweaked each aspect of your presentation, did you think about your references? Were they even a blip on your radar screen?

Treating references as an afterthought can be dangerous and may very well destroy your well-laid out job hunting strategy. Indeed, few people realize the importance of maintaining solid references. But references can make or break a job offer and this stage of the interviewing process should not find you scrambling for names, email addresses, and phone numbers, giving you no chance to talk to your references before your potential employer makes contact. When your potential employer or your recruiter calls for references, you should be able to immediately provide a list of at least three people. People who you have spoken with and prepared to be your references.

After all your careful planning and all the interviews, don't make the mistake of not having your references pre-qualified and prepared to provide focused and impressive feedback. Be well aware that your references won't be dropping you a line to let you know that they were less than complimentary. With changing company policies, employee turnover, and HR departments doing the legal cha-cha-cha to avoid company liability, securing your references is definitely a plan-ahead task, even if you're not currently looking for a job.

Don't Burn Bridges

It may sound obvious, but don't burn any bridges. When we're at our breaking point and ready to walk out the door, we've all said things we've later come to regret. Sure, your current studio head may be the biggest idiot you've ever had the misfortune to work with, but ripping him a new one on your way out the door won't do you any favors when you need a supervisor's reference. And he might poison any other potential company references.

People don't always get along. That's just life. But before you exit your current job, just suck it up and take a moment to end your relationship on a handshake and a positive professional note. If you've done good work, begrudging professional admiration can overcome personal distaste.

Stay In Touch

You're leaving your current place of employment, and odds are others will leave as well. Make sure you know how to contact your references in the future. Handing over a list of references with outdated contact information can be just as bad as an unfavorable reference. Don't make your potential employer jump through hoops to speak to your references. It can make you look like you're hiding something. If there is any tracking down to be done, you need to do it. But you can save yourself some time and frustration if you stay in touch with your references. You don't need to keep them on your daily "joke" email list, just let them know you may be using them in the



future as a reference and would like to stay in touch. When you move or change jobs, be sure to let all of your references know your new contact information and they will probably reciprocate.

When you start the interviewing process, be sure to reconnect with your references. Take a moment to refresh their memories as to what you did for them and the results that you achieved. Let them know you may be using them as references in the very near future and would like to know what they saw as your strengths and weaknesses. Don't let some criticism dissuade you from using a reference. Rather, take this opportunity to update them on what you're doing now and how you've turned those weaknesses into strengths. If your references see that you're aware of your weaknesses and that you've worked on them, this could translate into a positive reference with regard to your character and professional determination.

Selecting Your References

You want positive, upbeat and mature sounding references. Nothing is worse than having weak references destroy opportunities for you. References can be perceived as weak due to, for example, the following factors:

1. The person you chose as a reference, (although they say positive things), is depressive or negative in their presentation style. This can reflect poorly on you. How would you feel after taking a "positive" reference from a person who sounded like he was the only survivor of a plane crash?
2. The person you chose as a reference, sounds immature over the telephone, or reveals they are a friend or relative. Any combination of these factors can leave an uncertain or uneasy feeling with the company doing an inquiry. After all, how objective is your reference, if she is a friend or family member?
3. The person you chose as a reference is not easily available or does not make it a priority in their schedule to be available. Companies have limited time to set aside for reference checking. An unavailable reference will leave a negative feeling, especially if the company has had to chase down this person. If it's not important enough for your reference to set a few minutes aside and take the time to provide a well thought-out reference, then how good of a candidate can you really be for the job?
4. The person you chose as a reference has not worked with you in years, or never really worked with you directly, rather, he interfaced with another development team. This leaves a company doing an inquiry wondering why you can't provide references that worked directly with you. What is this candidate hiding?

Basic Guidelines for Dealing with Your References

Companies generally require three references. But it's a very good idea to have a fourth reference as back up. Sometimes references need to be contacted very quickly. Since you can't ensure your three main references will all be in town and available, have an alternate ready, just in case. Select your references strategically. A new hiring manager will want to speak to at least one person who has directly managed you in some capacity. Choose another reference who is a peer and has worked with you directly and can personally comment on your work style, ethic, and team performance. The third reference is optional, perhaps someone with a strong-sounding title like Vice President, General Manager, Head of Studio, Executive Producer, etc. If you don't have someone like this, then choose another manager or co-worker.

The most optimal time to release references is after you have completed the entire interview process and the company wants to extend an offer of employment. Hold off giving references as long as possible because you want to make sure that you understand clearly the



job responsibilities and the skills required to perform the job. How else can you "prepare" your reference if you don't know all the details? Another reason not to give references too early is that you don't want your references annoyed by repeated inquiries.

References are used to check out a doubt about you, verify your qualifications, investigate personality quirks or management concerns. You need to determine which of these questions may be asked of your references, then contact them to inform them on who may be calling, what the job was that you interviewed for, and what points you believe the hiring manager or company may wish to attempt to uncover.

Coach your references and prepare a script for them to utilize. What happens if you were fired from your last job or had a difference of opinion with the new management team that was just brought in? You may be required to provide at least one reference from your previous employer. You don't want a negative referral sabotaging a job offer. Providing a script and preparing your references ensures positive results. You want mature sounding, succinct, direct and positive references. References reflect on you and how you are perceived. References given in a strong, positive, and confident manner are received more positively than references that sound inexperienced or immature. Generally speaking, people are not very good at interviewing others or giving references. If your references do not know what concerns a hiring manager may have about you, they will not know what skill strengths to focus on to help relieve the concern. Help your references help you.

If using a friend or family member as a reference instruct them to *not* reveal this aspect of your relationship. Nothing weakens a reference more than the revelation that this person is a family member or close friend. How objective can your reference be if they are related to you or a long time friend? They are perceived as having an agenda for you, rather than as helping the company determine your viability for a job. Strong, succinct, business-sounding references are what you need.

Prepare your references. Contact each reference you plan to utilize. Once you have obtained permission from them to be used as a reference, send them the exact resume you plan to use when job hunting. In addition to your resume, you should also provide an outline a summary of your strengths, as well as a standard response for why you left your last company. Frame it positively, but base it in truth. For example: *I am looking for a new technical challenge, or the company is now taking a new direction, which does not line up with my career goals.* Prepare your references for answering questions like "Any weak areas?" or "Where does she need improvement?" Try to use your strengths to illustrate an area of weakness, for example: *He is a bit of a perfectionist and, therefore, tends to micro-manage his team. I am sure as more work experience is gained this trait will lessen.*

Don't fabricate stories or ask your references to lie. If you were fired, a script can be used to settle on a mutually agreeable story for why you were fired. Determine what positives are around leaving and present this to your references and your new potential boss. Point out what you have learned from the experience, and why you are so excited about this new opportunity. Avoid saying negative things about a prior employer, even if the industry rumor mill supports your comments. Bad mouthing prior employers is a major warning flag to hiring managers. It is unprofessional, and makes you sound like a bad egg, even if you are totally justified and correct in you're reasoning. Avoid negative comments at all costs. If your immediate boss is not an option as a reference, find an alternative.



Say "Thank You!"

Finally, let your references know that you got that job and be sure to say thank you. They have taken time out of their day to help you, let them know you appreciate the effort. Drop a note, make a quick call, or send a gift. Chances are you'll need those references again.