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Workforce Series #4

References and Letters of Recommendation

By Carolyn Clague, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Extension Youth Development / 4-H Specialist

What are References?

When you apply for jobs, you need to prepare a list of three to five references. These are people who will speak and write about your character, skills, and abilities based on their past interactions with you and your work, study, or volunteer experiences. Select references that will help you obtain employment. References can be your immediate supervisor or employer, past employers, present or past co-workers, subordinates, customers, suppliers, teachers, members of associations, or anyone else who can praise your work and recommend you for employment. Never list anyone as a reference until you have gained that person's permission to do so.

Many employers will contact at least one or two of your references. Remember the employer is preparing to make a big investment in hiring you and wants to be sure you are who you say you are. Having a few good references can be the deciding factor in getting the job offer.

Choose References Wisely

A good reference is someone who is professional and in a position of responsibility. The person needs to be articulate and positive. The position and title of your reference gives a message, too.

In some cases, your reference may no longer work for the company where you were employed together. Just be sure that the reference can be contacted and is willing to say how great you are and what an excellent job you did in the past. Clients make fantastic references along with past supervisors and colleagues.

If you have any doubts about your references, do not ask them. If you suspect that your potential reference may not say exactly what you would like, find someone else. Be prepared for a few people to decline your request – for whatever reason.

Finding Your References

Make a list of three to five people that you can ask to serve as your references. To be safe it is smart to have two or three ready to go at all times. Think about former employers, clients, college professors, family friends who have observed you in a professional setting, association leaders, and others who can vouch for your skills, experience, intelligence, integrity, and positive attitude.

For experienced job-seekers, most references should come from previous supervisors and co-workers, though you may also choose to list an educational (mentor) or personal (character) reference. College students and recent graduates have a little more flexibility, but ideally you should have several references from internships or volunteer work in addition to professors and personal references. Avoid listing family members; instead, clergy or friends can be personal references. Former coaches, vendors, customers, and business acquaintances are also acceptable.

The employer is looking for a logical mix of people without any obvious omissions. You need to consider how each person will describe your character and qualifications for the job based on their knowledge of you. Think about what you would expect each of your references to write and/or say about you when contacted by the employer. Be prepared to explain the relevance and relationship of all references.

Contacting References

Contact each of your potential references for permission. Keep track in a notebook of contact, date, and the person's responses, as well as notes from your discussion. Make a note of the key points that each reference agrees to highlight about you, if you have that information.

When you contact your references, do so via an indirect approach, such as letter, e-mail, or telephone. You want only good references, and if you are not sure you will get a good response, an indirect approach gives people a chance to decline in a courteous way.

Prepare Your References

Take time to speak at length with your references about the image you would like to project to potential employers. Make sure you know what your references are going to say so there are no surprises. These people are advocates for you. Discuss the following questions with your references, as these are the most likely to be asked by an employer. Be sure that you like the answers!

- What was your relationship with the job candidate and for what length of time?
- What responsibilities did the candidate perform in the position with you?
- Given a description of the position the candidate is applying for, do you think the candidate is a good match?
- Can you describe the candidate's communication abilities?
- How receptive is the candidate to new ideas and procedures?
- How well does the candidate take constructive criticism?
- Why did the candidate leave that position?
- What are the candidate's strengths?
- What are the candidate's weaknesses?
- Can you describe the candidate's leadership, managerial, or supervisory skills?
- Would you hire or work with this candidate again?
- Do you have any additional information or comments that might help with the decision?

Make a List of References

Never list references on your resume. Prepare a neat, typed list of your reference contacts on a separate sheet of paper entitled "References" or "Reference List." Use the same type of paper as you use for your resume and cover letter and state your name at the top of the page.

You should make several copies and have them on hand during your job interviews. If the employer wants to contact your references, he or she will ask you for names and telephone numbers.

Be sure you have the current job title, company, work address, and phone number for each reference. If a person's name is difficult to pronounce, provide a phonetic spelling to help the employer. Ask your references about their preferred means of contact – office, phone, personal

e-mail. This will ensure that recruiters are not frustrated and references won't be annoyed by countless messages.

Keep your references informed of your status in the job market. You never know when the opportunity may arise to use them. Reinforce the points you would like them to convey about your skills, experiences, and aspirations. You are not bothering them – they will be grateful for your input.

Let your references know when you have given their name to an employer. A quick e-mail letting them know that a telephone call may be coming to speak on your behalf and including the job position description and your resume is efficient and appreciative. Advance notice gives your reference time to read the position description and time to prepare for the telephone call. Then, as your reference is speaking with the interviewer, he or she can refer to this information and quickly respond to your skills and character being compatible with the position.

As important as keeping your references up to date during the search is thanking them afterwards. Regardless of the outcome of the search, let your references know the status and be sure to extend your thanks for their efforts. Using proper etiquette will help keep your contacts current. You might want to call on them again in the future.

How to Get a Letter of Recommendation

You may be asked to provide letters of recommendation. Keep in mind that the employer may have the letters circulate among a committee, so they may be read by several people. Or the employer may read the letter and then take the next step of contacting references or making a hiring decision.

Here are some tips for obtaining reference letters that make you stand out in a crowd of applicants:

- Choose your references carefully. Make sure they are individuals who are pleased to help you. Don't settle for less. A referral request should not be a burden or an imposition on the writer, and it should not be written by someone who is not enthusiastic about you.
- Ask your reference to write a letter that emphasizes your strong points and serves as an endorsement of your best character traits and skills. Remind the reference of a specific capability you have that you are proud of and ask if he or she would include it in the letter.

- Ask your reference to address specific skills and competencies in the letter. Dividing responsibilities in references is a very smart strategy. One reference can address not only your great personality, but also your event-planning skills. Another reference can highlight your counseling and disciplining skills.
- Always provide your reference with a copy of the position or job description and a current copy of your resume. Don't assume the reference knows everything about your background.
- Employers don't want to read letters addressed to "whom it may concern." Provide your reference with the name, title, and company name of the person who will receive the letter.
- Ask your reference if he or she would include a telephone number so that your potential employer may call without having to ask you for the contact information. Employers want to be able to contact and communicate with your references about your strengths and weaknesses and how fit you are for job.
- References writing a letter of recommendation or completing an employer's standard form should mail the letter themselves rather than have you handle it. This assures that confidentiality will be maintained.

Additional Letters of References

In addition to the references that you list on a job application or provide to an employer, it is also a good idea to collect letters from people who are advocates of

you, your skills, capabilities, and character, and then make copies and keep the original on file. Think of former employers, clients, and professors who can write letters vouching for you. If you have received letters from customers praising your work, be sure to save them for your reference file. Potential employers will want to see that type of unsolicited feedback. Think of reference letters as your endorsements.

About two weeks before you leave a position, but after you have given your notice, ask for a letter that you can keep on file for any future job searches, grant applications, or fellowships. If you are consistent, you will have a number of recommendations ready to go at any time as needed. Don't just ask your supervisors for recommendations, think of colleagues with whom you have worked well, and, if possible, try to get a letter from someone who has worked for you.

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