



LESSON 1

CHECKING REFERENCES EFFECTIVELY: MORE THAN JUST A FORMALITY

Introduction: The Most Underutilized Tool in the Hiring Process

Reference checking is one of the most critical and yet most underutilized steps in the hiring process. Too often, it is treated as a mere formality, a final box to check before extending an offer. But a well-executed reference check can be an incredibly powerful tool for verifying the information you have gathered in the interview, for gaining new insights into a candidate's performance, and for avoiding a disastrous hiring mistake. This lesson will teach you how to transform your reference checking process from a passive, administrative task into an active, strategic investigation.

Why Reference Checks Matter More Than Ever

- **To Verify and Validate:** A reference check is your opportunity to verify the claims a candidate has made in their resume and in the interview.
- **To Uncover New Information:** A good reference check can provide you with new and valuable information about a candidate's strengths, weaknesses, and work style.
- **To Protect Your Organization:** A thorough reference check is a crucial part of your due diligence. It can help you to uncover potential red flags and to protect your organization from a bad hire.

The Old Way vs. The Smart Way

The Old Way

- Asking for a list of references.
- Asking generic, closed-ended questions.
- Accepting vague, non-committal answers.

The 2025 Smart Way

- Asking for the names of recent direct supervisors.
- Using a structured, behavioral-based approach.
- Probing for specific, detailed examples.

A Step-by-Step Guide to a Powerful Reference Check

Step 1: Get the Right References

Don't ask the candidate for a list of "references." Instead, ask for the names and contact information of their last two direct supervisors. This is crucial because a supervisor is in the best position to provide an honest and detailed assessment of the candidate's performance.

Step 2: Prepare Your Questions

Don't wing it. Prepare a list of structured, behavioral-based questions that are tailored to the specific requirements of the role.

Step 3: Set the Stage

When you call the reference, start by setting the stage. Explain the role you are hiring for and the key competencies you are looking for. This will help the reference to provide you with the most relevant information.

Step 4: Ask Behavioral Questions

Use the same behavioral questioning techniques you used in the interview. Ask for specific, detailed examples of the candidate's performance.

- "Tell me about a time when [Candidate Name] had to deal with a particularly challenging project. How did they handle it?"
- "Describe a situation where [Candidate Name] demonstrated strong leadership skills."
- "What is the single biggest area for improvement for [Candidate Name]?"

Step 5: Listen for What Is Not Said

Pay close attention to the reference's tone of voice and any hesitations or evasiveness. Sometimes, what is not said can be just as telling as what is said.

Step 6: The Ultimate Question

End the conversation with this powerful question:

- “If you were to hire [Candidate Name] again, what advice would you give their new manager to help them be successful?”

This question is non-threatening and often elicits a wealth of valuable information about how to best manage and support the candidate.

Red Flags to Watch Out For

- **Difficulty Reaching References:** If a candidate is evasive about providing contact information for their former supervisors, or if the references are consistently unavailable, this is a major red flag.
- **Vague or Generic Answers:** If a reference is unwilling or unable to provide specific examples of the candidate's performance, this could be a sign that they have something to hide.
- **Inconsistent Information:** If the information you get from the reference check contradicts what the candidate told you in the interview, this is a serious concern.

Activity: Reference Check Role-Play

Working in pairs, one person will play the role of the hiring manager and the other will play the role of a reference for a fictional candidate. The hiring manager will conduct a structured, behavioral-based reference check using the techniques from this lesson. The reference should provide a mix of positive and constructive feedback. After 10 minutes, switch roles.