

How to Select Your Professional References

By Roger Manning

Before you enter into the interview process, you should put some thought as to who will be your professional work references. From the candidate's perspective, you may think that you are in need of people that are going to confirm that you are an outstanding person. From the employer's perspective, we need references from individuals that know your work habits, performance and capabilities and will speak honestly and openly. The employer needs to make sure that you are a good hire and investment of time, effort and money. Hopefully, you will be able to provide the work references that will support that you were an outstanding employee for very specific reasons.

As a general rule, I do not accept references from a candidate that have nothing to do with their prior work. Most employers will follow **this general rule:**

- 3 – 6 references
- Must be work related or performance related
- Current or prior direct Supervisors or higher level managers
- Customers/client relationships

Some other employers will allow you to submit whoever you want but don't plan on it.

Reference Don'ts:

- Friends
- Relatives
- Pastors, priests or church related
- Ethnic organization related
- Don't ask people to lie for you
- Don't give scripts of what to say about you

As an employer, I would expect that any friend, relative, or church member will obviously support what a wonderful person you are. Did you ever hear of a friend giving a bad reference? They, however, cannot give me the detail as to how you perform versus time pressures or other constraints; how have you performed versus company objectives; how do manage, teach, coach, etc. within the scope of your job. After all, as an employer, that is why I am interviewing you for possible hire with my company.

What Do I Do If I Can't Find Prior Managers/ Terminated/Fear of Bad Reference?

1. If you were **terminated**, be honest about it. What were the reasons given to you and what are the facts surrounding the termination? In today's world, candidates give certain reasons as catch-alls that imply that the employee had no fault in the matter. Such reasons are downsizing, mergers, product line sell-offs, or lack of

- work. Many of these causes of unemployment are no doubt the fault of the employee. However, careful and scrutinizing employers are going to dig into these reasons. Not everyone is a victim of down-sizing who is not at fault. Many times employers use down-sizing to get rid of the lower tier of poor performers.
2. If you **fear a bad reference**, call your prior manager and discuss your fear. The manager should only give the facts regarding your performance. If you fear a biased reference not based upon performance, remind the prior manager to stick with the facts. If you were terminated for cause, such as not meeting company objectives, then you need to be honest about it with your interviewer. If you fear that you may not get the job for your honesty, you may be right. Your best policy, however, is to be honest and explain what you have learned or what has changed about you that will make a difference in your performance with this new employer. Emphasis on improving your performance through mishaps and learning from mistakes is a much better and accepted approach in an interview as compared to deceiving the interviewer.
 3. If you **can't find prior managers** because they have moved on, then you must come up with other alternatives that will be familiar with your work. Alternatives could be:
 - a. Your bosses boss; this is the first and best alternative choice
 - b. Peers within the same company; could be chosen if they worked closely to you and were able to confirm your job duties and your performance through company rankings
 - c. Clients of the company that you directly interfaced; obviously this limits the new employer's view of your overall work ethic but they will still be able to see how you interact with the company's clients
 - d. Vendors to the company that you directly interfaced; this is less favorable as an alternative but could lead to an insight of your professionalism and interfacing skills

What Do I Do If I Don't Have an Employment History? / Recent College Graduate?

Again, it is important to focus on a reference source that can verify your level of performance, dependability or capabilities to assume responsibility. Recent college graduates should discuss their job hunting objectives with college professors, Dean of their respective school or advisers. Gain their permission and use them as evidence of your scholastic achievement, involvement with school projects or extracurricular activities where you demonstrated leadership and/or teambuilding traits.

Other sources could be:

- Work Study Program Advisors
- Part time job Supervisors
- Leaders of Organizations where you participated in committee work
- Any person that is capable of describing how they have observed you in an area of responsibility

If you are in a situation where you have sit out of the workforce for a period of time due to child rearing years, attending to sick & elderly parents or some other personal circumstances, then you may be short of references. You will want to seek out personal acquaintances that have held high levels or positions of responsibility that can testify as to your character and prediction of work ethics and responsibility. During a reference check, this type of individual will be better able to make comments or predictions about probable work ethics based upon their analysis of your character traits. Do not just rely upon friends because they will not be able to make the same credible analysis as an executive manager.

You shouldn't worry about this too much since most employers seeking entry level candidates realize that referral sources are limited to the above resources.

In summary, if you are getting ready to start a job-hunting venture, be sure to have all the contact information of your current and prior supervisors. Make it easy for your potential new employer to gain the references by supplying the reference work number, home number and cell/pager numbers. If they have moved on to another company, you should research and find that information as well demonstrating that you are up-to-date and still in a good relationship with your prior employer.