Conducting Telephone Pre-Employment Reference Checks



PURPOSE

A pre-employment reference checks serves largely to discover any undesirable factors in a job applicant's background prior to making an employment commitment.

WHY USE THE TELEPHONE

The most desirable way to conduct such a check would be by personal visit, but the telephone check serves adequately and is less expensive.

Letters or forms rarely uncover negative factors. People hesitate to put in writing information they might give either in person or by telephone, or because of the stylized approach of the form letter, the necessary information you seek might not be elicited. The telephone check can be guided into different avenues to gain information, depending on how the person giving the information is reacting to the questions being asked. Much more flexibility is thus provided.

PREPARATION FOR THE TELEPHONE CALL

The original interviewer should make the reference check. In all probability he or she is most familiar with the applicant and will have the background to do the necessary probing.

Make a checklist of questions bearing upon the particular job that you will want to ask about this particular applicant. Special questions should be tailored to fit the particular call.

Be sure you obtain permission from the applicant if you plan to call a present employer. You cannot jeopardize the applicant's present employment.

THE CALL ITSELF

Call the person who had direct supervision over the applicant. Do not attempt to get the information secondhand. For instance, do not try to get information from someone in a staff relationship (such as the HR department) unless no other channel is available. People in the HR office or accounting department can

verify dates of employment and termination, but they are not usually in a position to give valuable information regarding the job applicant's work habits, performance, etc.

Here are Some Do's and Don'ts to Consider:

1. Do not leave a call-back if the person you are trying to reach is not available. You may receive the return call when you are unable to discuss the applicant.

2. Identify yourself immediately, explain your position, and tell the party why you are calling about the applicant.

3. Assure your contact that any discussions you have will be held in confidence.

4. Ask whether he or she is free to discuss the situation.

5. Offer to have the party call you back collect if you sense that the person doubts the legitimacy of your call.

6. Try to establish rapport with the party you are calling. Maybe you know someone in their organization. Many times a freer exchange of information comes about when the individual you are calling identifies with your position, or some mutual point of interest.

7. Tell the person about the position for which the applicant is being considered. A better evaluation can be made if made in relation to a specific job. The job must be explained completely enough to have meaning.

8. Ask the general question such as, "How do you think the applicant would fit into our vacancy?" After the person responds, lead in with more specific questions, such as:

- What was the nature of the applicant's work with you?
- What are the applicant's strengths? Weaknesses?
- How did the applicant get along with co-workers?
- How did the applicant get along with supervisors?
- Did you consider the applicant reliable?
- Did the applicant meet commitments?
- Did the applicant have any personal habits you consider to be negative?
- Has the applicant been bypassed on promotions with your organization?
- How was the applicant's attendance?
- Why did the applicant leave your employment?
- Is there anything else you think I should know about the applicant?
- Would you reemploy the applicant?

9. Let the person talk freely in answering for as long as he or she wishes without your interrupting. Often a question from you at the wrong time will shut off further information.

10. Follow up and probe when you feel the contact is reluctant to discuss certain factors. Many times a further explanation of why you are 'digging in' will elicit the information you want. After all, you are doing the applicant a favor by checking. Placement in the wrong job could lead to ultimate unhappiness or even dismissal.

11. Be alert for obvious pauses in answering when you ask questions. Often these are a sign that further questions may bring further information you might not otherwise have received.

12. Do not be concerned about how long the conversation might take. A few dollars for a toll call might save untold dollars in expense in making the wrong hire.

13. Do not hang up until you are sure that you know the opinion of the person called. Frequently, you will receive ambiguous answers. The person called may give very little useful information. One technique that often works is to summarize the conversation by making either of the following two statements: “I take it that you don’t recommend the applicant for the position.” or “I take it that you highly recommend the applicant for the position.” Sometimes one or the other of these summary statements will evoke the responses you need.

14. Glance at your checklist of questions to be sure you have covered everything.

15. Always end the call by asking the person, “Would you reemploy the applicant?” Often this question brings forth information that you were unable to get by other questions.

16. Be sure to thank your contact for his or her help.