

Reference Checking

Staff Member Responsible:

ADMINISTRATOR of Hiring Department

*Designated Qualified Supervisor at Professional/Technical Exempt Level
Program Chair*

If Designated Supervisor or Chair completes the reference checks, the Administrator or Executive Staff member shall review and sign all reference check documents.

Reference Checking is one of the most important steps in the hiring process. The objective is to hire the most qualified person for your department/division. These guidelines are intended to assist you in this process.

References **must** be completed for both external and internal candidates. The process does not differ for either hiring consideration.

It is imperative that all finalists' references are checked **before** recommending a candidate for hire. It is recommended to complete this step before the actual interviews in the event that information is revealed from the references that may change the recommendation to interview an applicant. This will also avoid unnecessary expense of travel and time for an applicant.

The references must be included with the Recommendation to Hire packet with all the other necessary documents. There shall be no approval to hire unless all forms, including the references, are included.

The College's application process includes the candidate's signature of consent to obtain references and to perform background checks. *If reference insists upon a copy of release, inform the Director of Human Resources and we will send or fax a copy of the signed release to the reference – please do not offer to do this unless asked by the reference person.*

Important steps:

- Review the candidate's resume and application.
- Based on the review, prepare a list of the facts given and qualifications you want verified – including the relationship of the reference contact to the candidate and the length of time they worked together, responsibilities and relationships, if applicable.
- Review the job qualifications and prepare questions relevant to the position. All questions must be job related.
- Confirm prior job titles and dates; try to confirm salary in most recent position.
- Confirm the relationship between the person giving the reference and the applicant.
- Do not delay in obtaining the references. The longer you wait, the greater the risk of losing the candidate to another entity.
- DOCUMENT the scope and depth of your references and note requests even if they produced little or no information. This information helps protect the college against any negligent hiring claims.

Reference Checking (continued)

- The most reliable and realistic references are generally given by persons NOT listed by the applicant. It is strongly suggested that when you call the former employer, which is listed, you ask for names of other persons who have knowledge of the candidate's work performance, then call them.
- The laws protecting candidates against discrimination also apply when conducting reference checks. Absolute no: questions concerning age, race, sex, religion or national origin. These are not job-related questions and can expose the college to discrimination charges.
- If the reference has no actual knowledge of the candidate's work performance, ask the reference for name(s) of persons and telephone numbers of other persons with more knowledge of performance, achievements, strengths related to the job.
- *Caution: If a candidate is rejected solely because of a bad reference, have other objective reasons to reject a person who receives a bad reference, e.g. availability of a more qualified candidate. Discuss with the Director of HR, in this event, in order to ensure all necessary documentation is in place.*
- It is important to look for gaps in information supplied by applicants before calling for references and/or making a final hiring decision.

Tips for Effective Reference-Checking

- Inform the referenced person that the college has a signed release to obtain information from the candidate (you might get more information by making that statement)
- Describe the position, then make sure the questions are all job related
- Ask open-ended questions (follow the same format and basic questions for all references)
- May use follow-up questions for clarity and thoroughness
- Strive to obtain job-related facts and relevant information based on past behavior and experiences, rather than opinions. If possible, ask for examples of specific incidents
- Stay on the alert for any signs of evasiveness, unusual pauses

The *average* telephone reference call may not yield much usable information – employers are concerned about being sued for giving unfavorable references. *Case in point:* (actual case) – a terminated employee suspected former employer was bad-mouthing him behind the scenes – ex-employee hired private investigator to pose as a prospective new employer and call the former employer for a reference – investigator taped the employer stating unprovable allegations about the ex-employee's character and honesty – jury decided defamation and awarded almost \$2 million in total damages to the plaintiff.

Questions and Answers:

Q: How many references do I need to check?

A: Minimum of 3. Conduct as many reference checks as necessary to account for the number of years of experience required to qualify the applicant for the position title. Obtaining information from multiple references will allow you to determine whether the information provided is consistent and positive. Note patterns that emerge in terms of the comments made about the finalist.

Reference Checking (continued)

Q: If I know a candidate personally, do I need to check references?

A: Yes. References must be conducted on every person you wish to hire regardless of whether you know him or her on a personal basis, regardless of whether a coworker knows the finalist, and regardless of the level of position.

Q: Do I need written consent to check references?

A: Yes. Our application process covers this issue as the applicant gives written consent at this time. Do not check references on any person that has not completed the application packet. *If in doubt, check with Human Resources to ensure the person has gone through this application process.*

Q: What do I do if the applicant indicates NOT to call his or her present or a former employer?

A: If the candidate is a finalist, you MUST call the candidate and explain that he or she is a finalist and for further consideration to hire him or her, you will need to call the person that they had marked NOT to contact. The applicant must be also informed that no final decision has been made to avoid the applicant from assuming that he or she will be hired.

Q: If I receive a negative evaluation on a candidate, should I immediately disqualify him or her?

A: No. While it is important to consider any negative comments carefully, they should not immediately disqualify the candidate from further consideration. There are two sides to every story. Should this situation arise, the best course of action is to ask for specific examples to support the negative comments and then check additional references...more than 3, if necessary. Formulate a question that asks about the deficiency. For example, if one employer says the employee had a problem with tardiness, ask other references if the candidate was prompt, dependable and able to meet deadlines.

Q: If my finalist is a current STC employee, should I contact his or her supervisor?

A: Yes, absolutely. Simply because an applicant is currently working for the College does not mean that reference checks may be waived. While dates of employment for current employees may be obtained from the Office of HR, reference checks must still be conducted with prior departments to verify job duties and performance.

Q: With whom should I share reference information?

A: Information obtained through reference checks should be held to the highest level of confidentiality. This information should only be accessible to individuals relevant to the recruiting and hiring process for the particular vacancy. These individuals may include the respective Dean's or Vice President's Office, the President, and the Director of Human Resources.

Q: What is "negligent hiring"?

A: Negligent hiring is a failure by a prospective employer to check references adequately or to gather relevant information on a candidate hired. Obtaining reference information is vital to ensure that a new employee does not repeat negative past behavior, and employers may be held liable for not adequately checking reference information.

Reference Checking (continued)

Q: With concerns over liability, isn't it almost impossible to get a bad reference these days?

A: No. Although it is true that most references don't generally provide overtly negative comments, it is still possible to obtain information that is not positive. This may require you to evaluate the comments provided and compare them to the qualities, skills, and experience for which you are looking. For instance, if a reference states that the employee was a good worker, but not a good supervisor, he or she might be more appropriate for positions that do not have supervisory responsibilities.

Q: Some colleges/companies provide only basic information on a former or current Employee. Is this information useful?

A: Yes. Although obtaining a more ideal reference is someone who shares evaluative information, being able to confirm basic information provided on a resume or application is helpful. These reference checks such as dates of employment, job title, pay, and whether the employee is eligible for rehire. They also will allow you to determine the accuracy of the information provided.

Q: According to human resources industry experts, what percentage of resumes and applications contain material falsehoods?

A: One-third. With this in mind, reference checking is especially important and needed to verify information applicants have provided is accurate.

Please direct all questions regarding Reference Checking to the Director of Human Resources.

**SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE
EMPLOYMENT REFERENCE CHECK-
PROFESSIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE DOCUMENTATION**

APPLICANT _____ POSITION _____

Name of Former Employer _____ Phone _____

Person Contacted _____ Title _____

Sample script: "This is _____ and I work at South Texas College. We
(name/title)
would like to verify employment information for _____ as we
(candidate's name)
are considering him/her for a _____ position with our College. He/She has
given consent for us to check his/her employment with your organization."

What was your employment relationship with _____ ? _____

How long did you supervise (work with) him/her? _____

What was _____ 's position/job title? _____

What was the beginning date of employment _____ Ending date _____

What were the duties and responsibilities of his/her position _____

What were his/her strengths? _____

What areas for improvement? _____

What leadership capabilities did she/he have? _____

Describe how he/she got along with other employees? _____

Would you comment on his/her:

Attendance _____

Dependability _____

Ability to take on responsibility_____

Ability to work under pressure_____

Degree of supervision needed_____

Quality of work_____

Quantity of work and timeliness_____

What was the reason _____ left your organization?_____

Would your re-hire?_____

Do you have any additional comments you wish to tell me?_____

Thank you for your assistance. If we can assist you similarly, please call upon us.

Reference checked performed by_____ Date_____

(must be performed by a Professional/Technical Staff (exempt) member or higher)

Reference check reviewed and accepted by _____

(must be signed by an Administrator or higher)