



## **OFFICE OF HUMAN RESOURCES REFERENCE CHECKING FUNDAMENTALS**

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### **Reference checking is mandatory**

**If an employer does not make reasonable inquiry about the person they hire, and the employee causes injury, the hiring authority and employer can be found legally and financially responsible.**

It is essential that you contact at least three references, including at least one reference from an employer for which the candidate did not supply a reference. The District is not limited to checking the references that have been listed on the employment application. You can also ask the references provided for the name of another professional colleague who is familiar with the candidate's work. The opportunity to talk with someone who did not expect to be called as a reference can be a very valuable source of information. If you notice that a person had a brief tenure at a job, e.g. less than one year, or was terminated from a job, you should contact that employer as well.

Obtaining multiple references allows you to verify consistency among respondents and to demonstrate that you have made reasonable efforts to confirm the validity of information given on the application or during the interview. The harm associated with not obtaining references goes beyond not selecting the best candidate. Exercising due diligence is the best protection against legal exposure.

### **Confirm with Human Resources that a waiver has been signed**

As part of the application process applicants will complete a "Waiver for the Release of Information" form as a protection for you and the District. A sample form is provided in the appendix. Many applicants do not wish to have their current employer contacted unless they are considered a finalist in the process for fear of retaliation by the employer and we accommodate such requests. Should the applicant be forwarded as a finalist, hiring managers are encouraged to engage in a conversation with the finalist as to the reason why they have asked that the current employer not be contacted. In only the rarest of circumstances is it acceptable not to contact the current employer.

### **The Hiring Manager should do the reference checking**

The individual conducting the reference check should be thoroughly familiar with the duties of the job being filled, the skills required to perform the duties, and the personal qualities required to assure that the candidate meets the qualifications necessary to be successful in the position. Generally, this will be the hiring manager the position. Human Resources staff are available to provide support with the process and can also assist in conducting reference checks.

### **Obtain references from supervisors, peers and subordinates**

Your purpose is to discuss the candidate's past job performance with persons who can address this information. The best references come from former direct supervisors, peers and subordinates who directly observed the candidate's job performance. If the references you contact will not respond to your questions, the candidate must provide the names of people who will provide a reference or convince reluctant references to do so.



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### **Check references by phone, not email or by exchange of voicemails**

There are distinct advantages to a telephone conversation. For example, the tone of voice, a period of silence, or guarded response can change the meaning of a response dramatically. The direct contact also allows you to ask pertinent follow-up questions.

### **What to ask**

Focus reference check questions on knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors required for your specific vacancy. You should also inquire about any employee discipline history and if they are eligible for rehire. As in many other employment situations, questions about age, race, sex, religion, marital status or national origin cannot be asked. These are all federally protected categories and do not have anything to do with past or future job performance. In addition, you should not inquire about prior salary history. Additional information on how to interview a reference and sample questions related to specific areas of inquiry are included in the section titled “The Reference Checking Interview.”

### **Be consistent, ask each reference the same set of questions**

In conducting the reference check, you should be careful to ask the same basic questions about all applicants. This does not preclude you from asking follow-up questions based on the responses you receive. Weigh information you receive in the same manner for all applicants. What disqualifies one should be a basis for disqualifying any other if all other factors are equal.

### **There is no such thing as “off the record” comments**

There is no such thing as an “off the record” comment or conversation. You have to take into consideration all of the information given.

### **Use Google**

Although information found on Google is often unverified and unreliable, it *could* lead you to reliable sources of information. If you find concerning information as the result of a Google search, consult with Human Resources before taking any further action.



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### *The Reference Checking Interview*

#### Identify yourself

Immediately provide the contact with your name, title, the office/college/district you represent, and the purpose of your call. Offer to have the person call you back if you sense that they doubt the legitimacy of your call. If the nature of the reference you are seeking goes beyond factual information into evaluative information, be prepared to provide the person giving the reference with a copy of the written release you have obtained from the candidate.

#### Establish a rapport

Try to establish a rapport with the person you are calling. If you are familiar with the company/organization you are contacting or have a colleague in common with the contact person a few friendly or kind comments may “break the ice” and facilitate a freer exchange of information.

#### Describe the position

Tell the contact about the duties and responsibilities of the position you are filling. With this understanding, the contact will be able to provide you with a more accurate evaluation. Start with basic questions and transition into more performance based questions. You should have a prepared list of questions and facts to be verified. Use follow-up questions to clarify responses and get the details you need.

#### Let them talk

An experienced manager or supervisor will keep their comments brief and to the point during a reference check. However, if the contact is a bit verbose, let them talk freely for as long as they wish without interruption. A question from you at the wrong time could preclude obtaining valuable information.

#### What to listen for

Watch for obvious pauses in answering when you ask questions. This may be a sign that further questions may bring out more information. 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” will elicit the information you want.

#### Use your contacts

Now may be the time to use some of the professional contacts you have made through networking. You may know someone who can independently provide information for you about an applicant. In using this approach, however, it is essential that you have confidence in the judgment and professionalism of the colleague you entrust with providing reference information.



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### **Document**

Who was called, for what purpose, the questions asked and what information was provided should all be documented. This documentation may be important if there is a need to investigate a complaint regarding the process or your ultimate hiring decision. It is advisable that you keep such records for a period of three years.



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### *Sample Questions for the Reference Check Interview*

This section contains “typical” questions used in conducting a reference check. They are suggestions only. Not all questions need to be asked. You may wish to substitute questions based on the position being filled and responses you received from the candidate during the interview.

#### WHEN THE PHONE IS ANSWERED

Introduce yourself and state your title, where you work and your purpose. Before asking questions, describe the job and the competencies you are seeking.

- OPENING QUESTIONS

What was the candidate’s job title and primary duties with your organization?

How long did you supervise the candidate? What were the dates of employment?

- SKILLS AND ABILITIES

How would you rate the candidate’s level of knowledge, skills, and abilities in the following areas? The areas you inquire about should be based on those needed for the particular position. The official job description or job announcement for the position is an excellent source of information in this regard.

How would you describe the candidate’s level of computer skills?

Word processing

Spreadsheet

Data base

Are there any other applications the candidate has used?

What areas of improvement or development could the candidate focus on?

How would you compare them to others doing the same work?

- QUALITY OF WORK

Can you rely on the candidate’s work to be complete and accurate?

Is the candidate organized and consistent in the way he/she completes work assignments?

- DEPENDABILITY

On average, how many times a month was he/she absent?

How often does he/she come in late or leave early?

Has the candidate been off the job for any prolonged period of time during their period of employment with you?

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Are assignments completed in a timely manner?

- **INTERPERSONAL SKILLS**

How does the candidate get along with peers? clients? supervisors?

In difficult/stressful situations, describe how the candidate reacts.

What did the candidate do to “fit in” with his/her peers? the organization?

What suggestions would you make to help improve his/her ability to get along with others?

How effective is he/she in influencing others, especially those over whom he/she does not have control? Describe a situation where he/she demonstrated this skill.

- **FLEXIBILITY**

How does the candidate react to change in assignments? in the organization?

How adaptive is the candidate to new or changing working conditions?

Describe how the candidate adapts to the different styles of your management team?

- **INITIATIVE**

Does the candidate make suggestions for improvements? Give an example.

How would you describe the level of attention that the candidate requires from his/her supervisors?

Does the candidate require his/her supervisor to regularly assign tasks or does he/she seek out work on their own?

- **DISCIPLINE**

Was the candidate subject to any discipline that you are aware of? Whom should I contact to get more information about discipline?

Was the candidate asked to resign or did the candidate resign in lieu of being terminated?

- **CLOSING QUESTIONS**

Is this candidate eligible for re-hire with your organization? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you can add that would help me learn more about (candidate's name)?

Ask for names of other possible references.