

G Your Career

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Blow the whistle on referees

Nobody nominates a job referee that is likely to give them a bad reference. Perhaps referees need a deeper look, writes SIMON PANCKHURST.

Reference checking is an accepted part of the recruitment process. However some employers conduct reference checks with little purpose and little thought, switching to auto pilot and going through the motions.

Is reference checking effective in determining who to hire and who to bypass? Can we do better?

The concept of reference checking is a wise acknowledgement of an over reliance on the curriculum vitae and the employment interview. Both are both hugely dependent on the honesty of the applicant.

Given this clear conflict of interest, consulting a third party makes a lot of sense.

But under closer inspection there is a rather obvious and fundamental flaw in the logic of the common reference checking process. While there is benefit in approaching a third party that has known the applicant in a work context over a period of time we are expecting them to be honest about the applicant. Yet it's the job applicant that nominates the referee. Anyone smell a rat?

Is there really any merit in talking to a third party when that third party has been specifically nominated by the applicant? Would the applicant knowingly nominate a referee that they knew was not going to speak positively of them?

Faced with this argument some have suggested that while self nominated referees could be a little biased they are nevertheless a unique source of additional information. "

A good recruitment process is multifaceted," they protest. "By including information from a variety of sources and bringing it together we can be more confident of the final recruitment decision."

But can we confidently take value from referee responses? It involves consulting a third party whom we know absolutely nothing about.

Quite rightly we are openly skeptical of our applicant but why are we suddenly prepared to put faith in someone we haven't met, nor assessed, ahead of someone we have? Does their higher rank in the food chain guarantee their answers will be reliable and accurate?

What if the referee is reluctant to heap praise on our glowing applicant for the wrong reasons or worse perhaps they voice harsh criticism that is totally unjustified? Is there not a possibility that applicants that have distinguished themselves with bold thinking and innovation might have upset their conservative thinking bosses along the way?

Could it be a little hard to praise someone you've managed if that person had less experience and industry knowledge but who has then out performed you and is now searching for a position that reflects their success given your job is not available?

Another common flaw with reference checking is that it is typically carried out as the very last step of a recruitment process. At that point the ink on the employment offer is drying and the preferred applicant has often even been told, pending satisfactory reference checks, they'll receive an offer.

Yet even at this stage often a large number of very subjective questions are asked focusing on a range of job relevant criteria



Fair cop: Those who put their hand up to be someone's referee for a job are unlikely to be entirely objective in their assessment. Photo: Sydney Morning Herald.

such as establishing good relationships and completing projects.

So lets back the truck up a little.

Even if we could guarantee that our applicant nominated referee had an unparalleled ability to be completely objective, isn't it actually too late to be collecting general information?

At this final stage of the process typically the decision is all but made. Surely the only information of interest is factual evidence that completely contradicts the assessment of technical skills/qualifications or proves a serious breach of honesty or integrity.

Just as nobody breaks the peace prior to the wedding vows unless there is something the bride or groom really should know, minor applicant misdemeanors aren't really relevant.

Essentially the process has indicated the applicant has met key criteria and is suitable. At this stage reference checking is not adding value by revealing dirt or even positive information. It is very useful however if it discloses blatant misrepresentation or falsification.

During the interview the applicant should have been asked factual questions about any previous misconduct, dishonestly or criminal convictions. A reference check, even if from a stranger, that confirms no skeletons adds value.

While we can never be 100% confident that referees will always give honest answers most will think twice about lying when asked direct yes/no questions. Make it difficult to twist the truth.

Furthermore where possible ask the applicant if you can speak with a previous employer they did not nominate as a referee. It is important they are given the opportunity to approach this person and request their permission.

So if asking an unknown, applicant-selected, referee subjective questions has caused a little anguish, consider changing the focus of reference checks and keeping it short, simple and direct.

With luck the referee's conscience will overshadow any conflict of interest.

Simon Panckhurst is managing director of recruitment specialists HR Direction Ltd, (03) 977 1972.
www.hrdirection.co.nz