

H. R. TIPS FOR MANAGERS

This series, "**H.R. Tips for Managers**", is a periodic publication of Berkeley Developmental Resources (BDR). BDR consultants who have had experience as the head of human resources in their organizations author the articles. The content, written in informal, user-friendly style, provides a quick reference for managers coping with various human resource management issues.

This month's article, "Tips on Reference Checking" is by Gail Reichard, Senior Consultant with BDR.

Tips on Reference Checking

Primary Focus:

To get reference sources to give you the most candid information possible, so that you can determine how the candidate matches up with your open position.

Issues:

Because of legal concerns, or friendship with the candidate, reference sources are often reluctant to disclose any information which might be construed as negative. This is true even though employers and prospective employers have a "qualified privilege" under law, because sources often fear the expense and hassle of defending themselves, even if they are confident they would win the case in the courts in the long run.

When you contact sources that are still working in an organization which currently or previously employed your candidate, this problem may be compounded by an organization policy of only permitting reference checking to occur through their human resources department. Policy often limits their information to confirming dates of employment, job title, and salary information.

Telling the reference that the candidate him/herself has given you their name as a personal reference can usually surmount this.

In the case of friendship, obviously the source does not want to be the cause of a decision not to hire their friend.

In spite of these obstacles, it is often possible to get very helpful information from reference sources.

(Note to the reader: The examples given below were developed for a client who was filling an opening for a Human Resources Director. These examples are geared to issues appropriate for that role. Of course, the basic concepts embodied in each example can be adapted to apply to any position you may be filling. Also, the approach described here is best used when you have a candidate who has already made it through at least one preliminary interview, and is still in the running for your open position.)

Strategy and tactics:

It is usually quite easy to get positive information about job candidates from reference sources. The tough part is getting at those potential negatives. You must help reference sources to see that it is in no-one's best interest for you to hire someone who will not likely be successful in the job. To do that, it is critical to present your inquiries in ways which make it clear that you are looking out for the candidate's interests, as well as your own. "Good fit" between the job and the candidate should be the consistent theme of your inquiries.

A. The opening:

For example, "John Jones gave me your name as a reference. He has applied for a position as the corporate human resources director for our company, and I would like to speak with you for a few minutes regarding your knowledge of John's capabilities. Is this a good time for you?" (If not, set up a time that is good.)

"We liked John's background when we spoke with him, and he has made it to our second round of interviews, along with several other candidates."

(Always indicate that the decision is still very open, so that there is no expectation that this particular candidate will necessarily get this job.) "At this point, we are looking to speak to others who know him and his work, to round out our own perceptions. All information from references is kept strictly confidential. Please be candid – we need someone who will be a good match with our company and the job, and I know that a successful fit is very important to John as well."

B. Body of questioning:

1. Clarify the nature of the relationship between the reference source and the candidate (former boss, colleague, client, subordinate, etc.)
2. Check to confirm that important information candidate has given about his work at that organization is accurate. (Job title, main responsibilities, salary, etc.)
3. Then ask specific questions, based on what you most want to explore with someone who has actually worked with this person. Reference sources will not usually give you great quantities of time, so focus on getting the most critical information you want from that particular source. Within the limited time available, try to build a relationship with the source before you ask questions which may be difficult or negative. First ask a few questions where you think the responses will be positive.

Often you need to give information about the job or your company in order to help the source see the relevance of your specific inquiries, and why the "fit" issue is so important to both parties.

For example: "One important aspect of our job is the ability to relate very effectively to blue-collar workers on the line. Without really good skills in

that area, the person will fail in the job. Have you observed John operating in that capacity? How did he handle that role? Compared to others you have observed in that capacity, how effective was he?"

Another example: "One of the most difficult aspects of our position here at Company X is the ability to influence our field managers. They are used to doing things their own way, but now that the company has expanded, we need them to comply with certain consistent policies. Did John have any experience with you that shows how he handled this kind of issue?"

What's the best example of how John had to operate through influence, rather than direct authority, in your organization?"

If the source seems reluctant to give much information, try describing what you think you saw in the candidate, then ask the reference source if you're right, or if you have misinterpreted or missed something. Listen carefully for real agreement vs. lip service.

For example: "John seemed to us to be someone who likes a lot of autonomy in his work, with only very minimal guidance from the boss. Is that your experience of him?"

. Another example: "When we talked to John, he seemed to feel that employee relations would be an area of strength for him. What do you think? Can you give me an example or two that stands out in your mind?" You may even want to throw in a deliberate misperception to see if the source will correct your impression. If they do, you will feel more confident that they are giving you their honest impressions of the candidate.

If there was an area you missed in the original interview with the candidate, you may be able to fill it in via reference sources.

For example: "We didn't really get around to discussing John's experience in plant safety issues during our first interview – do you know

anything about his abilities in that area?” Be sure to follow this up with the candidate in any subsequent interview, and in other reference checks.

Relationship issues are critical for ultimate job success and don't show up on resumes, or even in interviews sometimes. Probe them carefully with reference sources.

For example: “John will be managing other human resources professionals if he comes to work here. What is his style when he manages others? What kinds of people work best for him?”

Another example: “John would be reporting directly to me if he ended up in this position. Since you've had the experience of being his boss, what do you think are the most important things for me to know about managing John successfully? I would want to bring out the best in him, and minimize any weak spots.” After letting the source respond, follow up with, “What are the areas where John will likely need further development in order to be as successful as possible in the job I've described?”

Another example: “In your organization, how did John get along with his subordinates, his peers, field managers, his boss, the executive committee, the board, the line workers, etc.? What kind of environment brings out the best in him? What kind of environment do you think he should avoid, given his strengths and preferences?”

Sometimes you can word questions so that the source does not perceive them as negative, even if you are searching for potential negatives. Often this involves giving them the choice of two or more neutral answers.

For example, if you think a candidate might not be “managerial” enough for the position, you might ask the following question:

“We recognize that no-one can 'do it all' in a big job like the human resources director position, and we anticipate we may need to round out that department with staff who complement the director’s skills. Based on your experience with him, which aspect of the human resources director’s job would John be strongest at and enjoy the most – the technical/professional side or the administrative/managerial side? Why do you think that?”

C. Closing:

Toward the end of the reference check, you need to ask a couple of global questions which may net any real negatives which could otherwise go unspoken. Although it is possible that a source will lie to you, asking the questions this way will minimize that possibility.

“As I'm sure you understand, the head of human resources is a very sensitive position. Is there anything you know of which could be damaging to our company, or to John, if we were to hire him for this position? Anything like an honesty or integrity issue, legal or moral problem, addictive behavior issue, termination for cause, or any other issue we should be aware of?”

If the source seems to waffle at all, or you sense any possible problem, try probing again. “As you know, companies have to be very careful these days to avoid a negligent hiring decision, especially in such a sensitive position as a human resources director. That’s why we take the time to check references on all our candidates, and why we keep that information so confidential”.

Make your last question a real catchall:

“Thank you very much for speaking with me today. It has been most helpful in getting to know as much as possible about John, so that we can give him

full and fair consideration as a candidate. Is there anything else we should know about him before we close? Anything else you would like us to know about him?"

Throughout the reference check, probe the source for examples of how the candidate actually behaved in that organization. If the source says the candidate is "great with people", ask what he has observed the candidate do that causes him to say that.

D. Follow-through:

Compare the information from the reference source to the perceptions you formed from the resume, the preliminary interview, and the other references. Except in the case of a serious "knock-out" issue, you are looking for patterns of behavior that either fit well with your open position, or don't.

No candidate is perfect, so keep minor negatives in perspective. Which ones can you live with, compared to the candidate's strengths, versus which ones would be truly damaging to your organization? If there is a major negative, you should usually eliminate the candidate. If there is a minor negative, structure a few questions to probe that issue further with the candidate at any subsequent interview, or in other reference checks, without giving away the confidential source or the specific information given by the source.

E. Keep your promise about confidentiality if you turn up a significant negative.

Never let the candidate know you have received negative information from references. If you have already scheduled a follow-up interview with the candidate, don't cancel it – nothing gives a candidate a tip-off that his references have spoiled his chances of landing the job faster than having you go "cold" on him right after reference checks.

Make sure any colleagues who are part of the interviewing process maintain vigilance about confidentiality as well. In fact, unless they have a real “ need to know” about negative information you may discover, keep it to yourself. This is especially important if they know the candidate personally, or know someone who does, since this is the situation most likely to result in "leakage" of confidentiality.

SUMMARY

If you concentrate on these three concepts, you will get the best results from your reference checks:

1. Emphasize that you are looking for "good fit" between the person and the job and the organization, so that both sides will be successful; even great people don't do well in all settings and roles, and it is no favor to them to end up in a poor fit situation.
2. Continually probe for specific examples of previous behaviors that relate to your open position. To keep it from sounding like a 3rd degree grilling, change the wording of your probes, and concentrate them on the most critical areas of concern.
3. Make it easy for the source to give you honest, even if negative, information about the candidate by showing that you are looking out for the candidate's best interests as well as your own, and that you understand and appreciate the candidate's strengths.

If this article was helpful to you, please give us your ideas for any other topics you would like to see covered in future articles in the "H. R. Tips for Managers" series. Click on gail@BDRconsultants.com to send your message.