



Guide To Checking Employment References

- Legal aspects of reference checking
- Best practices
- Steps to follow when contacting references
- Template: Reference Check Questionnaire

If you would like future assistance or have any questions, please contact Employment(x3306)

Preamble

Western Washington University [Conducting Background Checks](#) policy (POL-U5400.08) requires verification of

- required credentials
- employment history, and
- a reference check that should include at least two professional work references.

Since past performance is often the best predictor of future performance, the best way to verify an applicant's background and job suitability is to conduct a thorough reference check.

Calling references is the recommended method; letters of reference should only be used to supplement the process. Telephone reference checks make it possible for you to listen to the tone of the reference and to encourage the reference to talk. It also allows you to get clarification about a comment or observation as well as ask follow-up questions.

Legal Aspects - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Do I need written consent to check references?

A. The applicant's WWU application includes each candidate's authorization that serves as consent.

Q. What does the term "defamation of character" mean?

A. Defamation of character is communication to another of information, which is false and injurious to the reputation of an employee or former employee. Employers may and should provide truthful reference information without fear of liability if the information is factual, without malicious intent or discriminatory.

Q. What does negligent hiring mean?

A. "Negligent hiring" is a failure by a prospective employer to adequately conduct a background check. Employers can be held liable for not thoroughly checking reference information. It is important to obtain adequate information to ensure that the new employee does not repeat negative past behavior and create problems on the job.

Q. Who should I share reference information with?

A. All reference information should be maintained in a confidential manner with access given to those on a need to know basis. This is particularly important when receiving information about criminal activity and credit history.

Q. What kinds of questions are illegal?

A. The discrimination laws that apply to interviewing should be applied to reference checking. Do not probe into marital status, age, gender, disability, race, religion, creed, sexual orientation, veteran status or national origin. For more information please see ([Prohibited Interview Questions/Inquires](#)).

If the reference provides unsolicited inappropriate information, do not write this information down in your notes and do not disclose the information to anyone else. Contact the Equal Opportunity Office (650-3307) if you have questions or concerns.

Best Practices - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Should I check references for all final candidates?

A. The process should be handled consistently and thoroughly for all applicants who are under serious consideration in the interview process. At what stage (semi-finalists or finalists) to

do references checks is up to the hiring department; however, whatever stage is chosen, all candidates in that stage must receive the same screening treatment.

Obtain several references for maximum objectivity. Use the same list of questions for each reference source and make an attempt to contact the same number of references.

Q. Should I document the Reference Checks?

A. Yes. Documentation should be maintained on all reference checks as part of the selection process materials.

Q. Can I ask others to help in checking references?

A. For consistency, it is best if the same person(s) does the reference checks. If it's not possible, make sure that everyone uses the same list of questions.

Q. Who can and should I contact?

A. The most common reference sources are current or former supervisors, colleagues, or customers. Personal references are less preferred because they do not usually yield objective information.

Applicants may wish that their current employer not be contacted unless they are going to be offered a position or are at least a finalist. Try to respect and accommodate this request. If this is a concern of the candidate, let him/her know when you will be contacting their current supervisor so that s/he may give the supervisor a heads up.

Anyone you know that may be able to provide information about the candidate may be contacted, however, you are encouraged to inform the candidate who you intend to contact.

Q. How should I contact references?

A. The most effective approach is to contact the reference by phone or in person. Writing to the reference contact is usually not effective and typically yields little information or no response. The supervisor or a member of the search team should conduct the reference interview.

Q. What if the candidate only uses personal references?

A. The purpose of obtaining references is to understand how someone performed in a work setting. Personal references do not accomplish this. If the candidate gives only personal references, ask him/her to give you references who can discuss their work performance.

Q. What if the reference does not return my phone calls?

A. In cases where the reference does not return your phone calls, contact the candidate and ask that they let the reference know the importance of returning your call. This usually is effective.

Q. What if the candidate only had one job?

A. If your candidate has had only one job, ask to talk with another person in the organization who is familiar with their work. This could be a co-worker or another manager for whom

they did some work.

Q. Do I have to have the reference check completed before offering a position?

A. Yes.

Q. If the candidate is internal, can I contact the candidate's current supervisor?

A. Yes. As a courtesy, inform the candidate that s/he is being seriously considered for the position and that you will be contacting their current supervisor.

Q. What if the candidate objects to your contacting their supervisor?

A. Feel free to ask why and be sensitive to the candidate's wishes if appropriate. Thoroughly discuss options of other suitable references from the current job such as colleagues with whom they worked on projects or work groups.

Q. I have viewed the personnel file but I would like to learn more about the candidate's knowledge, skills, and abilities.

A. Viewing the personnel file should in no way replace directly contacting the WWU present supervisor or other reference sources. It is important to speak to references to determine if the individual is an appropriate match for your vacancy.

Steps to Follow When Contacting References

- Contact the reference by phone or in person. Writing to the reference is usually not effective and typically yields little information or response.
- Ask the same questions of each reference source.
- When contacting the reference, identify yourself, your position; give the name of the candidate and the reason for your call.
- Establish rapport: Ask the contact if this is a convenient time for you to speak with them or request to schedule a telephone conference.
- Before asking questions, describe the job and the competencies you are seeking. This will give the reference a change to structure their thinking.
- Decide whether this individual can evaluate the candidate's capabilities adequately to serve as a reference. Did he or she supervise or work with the candidate? For how long? When?
- Ask the reference if he or she needs to retrieve a file or other information on the candidate.
- Start with general basic questions and transition into more specific performance based questions (see Sample Reference Checking Questions).
- Ask if you can call back if you have additional questions.
- Ask for names of other reference sources.
- Thank the reference for his/her time and cooperation.

REFERENCE CHECK QUESTIONNAIRE

Candidate Name: _____ Position: _____

Name of Reference: _____ Title: _____

Relationship: _____ How long known? _____

Confirm job title/dates of employment: Are they consistent with resume/application? Yes No

Confirmed job duties: Are they consistent with resume/application? Yes No

Reason left position according to reference: _____

Using a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being weak and 5 being strong, can you tell me how you would rate (name of applicant) in the following areas?

Work ethic/attitude 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Attendance/Punctual 1 2 3 4 5
(you may not consider medical leave if mentioned)
Comments:

Timeliness in completing work 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to handle pressure/deadlines 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to work well with students 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to work well with faculty 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to work well w/ co-workers/others 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to take responsibility 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Communication skills (written/oral) 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to work as a member of a team 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to creatively solve problems 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to work cooperatively with management 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to learn quickly 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to work independently 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Ability to supervise effectively 1 2 3 4 5
Comments/How many people supervised?

Overall quality of work 1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Knowledge in _____
Comments:

1 2 3 4 5

Skills in _____
Comments:

1 2 3 4 5

What would you say are the candidate's strong points?

What would you say are the candidate's developmental needs (things we might want to help the candidate work on up front)?

Would you rehire the candidate? Yes No Maybe

Is there any additional information you want to provide?

Reference check completed by

Name

Date

Security Sensitive Positions

Working With Children

How would you say he/she relates with children?

Have you ever seen him/her discipline a child? If so, please describe what you saw him/her do?

Are there any concerns we should have about the applicant's ability to care for children or in any way endanger the children under the applicant's care?

Handling Money

_____ has applied for a position that requires handling large sums of money. Are you aware of any problems he/she may have that would cause you concern about entrusting him/her with this responsibility?

Would you consider this person to be honest and dependable?

<If no, ask for specific examples of problems so that you eliminate rumors and gossip>

Security Access

_____ has applied for a position that requires access/permissions to confidential and sensitive information, equipment, etc. Are you aware of any problems he/she may have that would cause you concern about entrusting him/her with this responsibility?

Would you consider this person to be honest and dependable?

<If no, ask for specific examples of problems so that you eliminate rumors and gossip>