

The Interview, Part 4: References

"Brutus was an honorable man" or "He's a good guy", are typical examples of what literary people call damning by faint praise. The first quote is from William Shakespeare's play, Julius Caesar. The second has been uttered by nearly all of us at some time or other. People would rather come up with some kind of vague compliment that is without substance, either to avoid negative comment about someone or to avoid silence, which can also be construed the same way. When giving a business reference, this can be toxic.

As a job candidate, a major order of business is to determine those colleagues that will be your best references. They must include former supervisors, peers, customers and direct reports. It is not uncommon for me to speak with six to ten references for one candidate when I am performing a retained search. I like to mix and match. If an executive works more effectively with seniors or peers, but not so well with those beneath them, this evidence will surface and probably will end their candidacy. When a candidate indicates that they cannot get a reference from their previous supervisor, this is a definite "red flag". Understandably, there are circumstances where people leave companies following policy disagreements or personality clashes with their superiors, which may preclude obtaining a reference from them. If a candidate is reluctant to produce any former superiors as references, I probably will not work with them. Occasionally circumstances surrounding someone's departure from a company can take on a more bizarre and unusual nature. In all such cases, it is essential that they have credible references from their peers or other senior executives who can corroborate their story.

To illustrate, many years ago, I was searching for a highly specialized executive for a major financial services company. I had recruited a candidate from a competitor and was surprised at how willing he was to leave his then present employer. I was also concerned that he was reluctant to allow me to speak with his superior (after his resignation). Under considerable pressure, this candidate had solved a major problem concerning information used for government reporting. Had he not fixed it, his employer would have faced fines in excess of one million dollars. I could not understand why his company would allow such a talented and valuable employee to leave without any enticement to stay. This created a concern for me that perhaps he was not sharing his entire story. While checking references with his peers and customers, I asked them to explain why they thought he was leaving. Only one of them, another peer, offered that my candidate's boss was having an affair with one of his peers and was more focused on furthering her career. My candidate was left to deal with unwanted projects. His requests for more challenging work went unacknowledged, which on a broader scale, created a morale issue in the department. Stories like this one, while not pleasant, give some insight into the human side of the workplace, the importance of professional behavior and the necessity of corroborative references.

Anyone who is being terminated for cause must know before taking job interviews what kind of reference they will receive from their employer. Many companies will not furnish a reference under any circumstance or at least in these cases. They may also apply a more "gentle" term

such as layoff when explaining cause for someone's dismissal. They do this for three reasons. One is to avoid the publicity of legal action due to sensitive issues, the second is to diminish the appearance of being harsh and vindictive and the third is to prevent them from being held liable if a person cannot find new employment. Missed deadlines, cost overruns, political shakeouts and the like have derailed many careers. Many people have been terminated for cause and fear that potential employers will be unfavorably influenced by their dismissal. To help reduce this discomfort, I have frequently explained to my clients at the time of candidate presentation, why they have been terminated, and offer to obtain supporting references. Such references must exist and cannot be assumed. This allows the candidate to relax during the interview and get down to the business of exploring the opportunity, without being distracted by concern for what the company knows or does not know concerning their dismissal. If you have been dismissed for unlawful or unethical conduct, you will more than likely receive no reference at all. This will be influenced by whether you are subject to criminal or civil charges, or breach of corporate ethics policy. Such information can be highly prejudicial and may preclude further employment in your career field.

One of the first rules of obtaining work references is very basic: you must obtain permission from each person you use. You must also obtain their phone number(s) where they wish to be contacted and a general idea of when it is most convenient for them to receive such a call. Not seeking permission may be career suicide for you. This is a "loose cannon" and could leave you exposed to unnecessary and inappropriate negative comments. It is also rude and inconsiderate to expect a colleague at any management level to provide a qualified reference without their prior consent. Approach each person beforehand and ask if they would be willing to furnish a factual, detailed and positive employment reference for you. They must feel enthusiastic and comfortable and if they decline, find others. Executives from previous employers, with whom you may have lost contact, should be contacted again. This is a good argument for maintaining your network. They may have forgotten your accomplishments or may confuse you with someone else. If time permits, each person who agrees to provide a reference should be warned whenever you think a potential employer will call them. Hiring companies have, on occasion surprised the reference provider with their call. That person's surprise may cause their presentation to be hesitant as they collect their thoughts. If your reference provider is ready for the call, they will be enthusiastic, direct and crisp in their presentation, which is as important as its content. Many years ago, one of my clients upon making a reference call was greeted with, "Who? Oh, him, yeah, I remember him now?" This response had a chilling effect. In every case the first impression is the last, even with references.

Be sure to manage your references, which are a valuable asset. Do not include them on your resume. If you do, you have just handed everyone who sees it a list of potential sales leads or competitors for the job you want. If your references are annoyed with nuisance calls, they may not give you the level of quality you expect or may withdraw altogether. A previously unknown recruiter or company who asks to check references before working with you is making a legitimate request. While you may not want every stranger you meet speaking with your references, you are the one seeking a new position and must be prepared to do so. Be sure you trust someone before you give them your references

A bona fide business reference should be very factual. A provider of a reference must be able to factually describe the accomplishments of the person being checked out. They should be able to give a brief but accurate description of the candidate's responsibilities and then be able to speak to some level of detail about how these responsibilities were or were not met. Some examples:

- Orchestrated and directed a global rollout of SAP on time and under budget for a \$3 Billion enterprise.
- Saved the company \$1,000,000 through process re-engineering and work simplification.
- Renegotiated vendor contracts saving \$5,000,000 over 3 years.
- Rescued a deteriorating client relationship.

If a business reference cannot provide this kind of factual information, because your working relationship was not close enough, find someone else who can.

Some of our members have reported that they remain in regular contact with the people who provide their references. Much as you may tweak your resume to make it fit a new opportunity, candidates will alert their references not only to potential employer calls, but will also explain the target company and position, to facilitate adjustment of comments that will better showcase job fit. In return, they will share latest market intelligence with their references.

Circumstances can and do vary. Candidates who have a long tenure with their present company are always reluctant to offer recent business references to avoid unnecessary risk of exposure. I advise them to contact former supervisors, peers and other colleagues who may have already left the company or at least transferred to another business unit. This also reduces potential risk from overheard phone calls.

Many companies have a standing policy of not giving out references on former employees. Ex-employees, who feel they have been unfairly represented, have sued former employers. Hiring companies have also sued the former employers of recently hired people for inaccurate references. I doubt that any major company has escaped this kind of legal action. Rather than attempting to control the content of the reference, companies now refuse to provide one. In many cases, people ignore company policy and provide a reference anyway, which may indicate that they are offering enthusiastic and positive information to help a former colleague, making their report a low-risk effort.

Retained clients typically expect me to verify college degrees and compensation. If a candidate does not have an official college transcript available, I fax a letter to the degree-granting institution asking them to verify credentials. In order to do so, I must present the candidate's full name, social security number, degree and year earned. Many people are understandably reluctant to give out their social security number. To avoid such risk, have a copy of a college transcript handy. To verify compensation, your most recent W-2 or paycheck stub will suffice, but be sure to block out your SSAN.

As a senior IT executive, you will be called upon to furnish references for former employees. Keep some key points in mind:

- If you can't give a positive, factual reference, don't give any. Silence is just as effective as a negative reference but it will not give you or your company legal exposure. Refer the caller to the Human Resources Department. It should have been advised by the Legal Department or Corporate Counsel on how to deal with these issues.
- The Fair Credit Reporting Act governs how consumer reporting information (which includes references) may be obtained and used. The law was written to protect the individual, not the company.
- Avoid giving any opinion, unless it is supported by documented fact.
- Avoid overusing vague compliments or expressions, such as, "she was a good employee", "he was always on time", "everyone found her to be pleasant", etc. It is acceptable to make such comments when providing a positive, detailed and factual reference, but on their own, they are almost worthless and can damage someone's candidacy.

Unofficial references can either help or hurt you. These are the unauthorized references that occur when a hiring executive reviews a candidate's resume. S/he recalls that someone in their company has worked at a company employing the candidate. S/he then speaks with this person about the candidate. If this "internal" reference provides favorable input, the candidate becomes more attractive. If their report is negative, in all likelihood, the candidate will not be interviewed, and may never know why. Whether this practice is legal or ethical is matter of opinion. It is another means to leverage your network and is impossible to stop. Everyone is trying to reduce risk. The only way to minimize negative input on such a reference is to be a good team player. It is impossible to eliminate it. All of us have others who may not like us. If they are on the inside, by default they have more credibility because they are already on the team. I have seen many potential candidates eliminated by this type of reference, and a few have been assisted by it.

Poor references can ruin potential opportunities. Ensure that you are using the best people possible for yours. Include people above, at and below your level. Be cautious and factual when furnishing a reference for others. If their performance is outstanding, be able to support your beliefs with facts. In all cases discretion is your best ally.

Good luck in your search.

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