

Managing References

A few readers from TENG and FENG contacted me with additional questions concerning business references, following Newsletter Vol. 3 No 21, "The Interview, Part 4: References." I feel that it is necessary to address some of the questions which were raised and remind you that I welcome member feedback to any newsletter, because your thoughts and questions help to broaden my knowledge.

One of our members commented that some of his references have disappeared for number of plausible reasons:

- He consulted for a few major pharmaceutical firms which subsequently underwent mergers. His former clients, whom he could use as references have moved on to parts unknown.
- Some of his clients were in the financial services industry, which has contracted considerably, yielding the same result as above, amplified by losses from 9/11.
- People employed by dotcoms, scattered when these companies failed. Anyone who was employed by a startup or who consulted to one may have difficulty finding previous co-workers, supervisors and clients.
- Those who have worked as self-employed consultants need to use customers as references, for future engagements or if they wish to seek permanent employment. How to they select which ones to use?

Another member commented that one of his former employers, a well-known global firm, had preached team-building and diversity as its mantra. In fact, this member had witnessed very subtle yet unmistakable and exclusionary discrimination practices, and was not certain he could obtain a reference that would corroborate his accomplishments while with that company.

One of our FENG colleagues, formerly employed by a small, privately-owned company offered a more extreme variation. He suffered through the stress and stinging humiliation of abusive behavior from the company owners toward its professional staff, characterized by ethnic slurs, insults and profanity. Since he was not of the same national origin as his employers who he had observed treating co-workers so disrespectfully, he was worried about what they would say about him during a future reference call and how he should address his departure from that company.

Each of them was concerned about how to present a strong portfolio of references, account for every job, provide positive references from unpleasant experiences, and in the latter two cases avoid speaking negatively of former employers.

Before we examine solutions, let's first list two issues which are beyond the control of everyone:

- The business world is constantly changing and is very fluid. People change their positions, companies are sold or they go out of business. Almost everyone's contact information changes in

some way, even if they never relocate. They establish new Email accounts, obtain non-published phone numbers and change jobs to name a few reasons.

- We can't control the personal attitudes and behavior of others, especially employers and co-workers. We can't always predict it when we're hired, either. Executive management and business owners that practice or condone abusive behavior toward their employees for any reason, whether subtle or overt, are wasting their most precious corporate resources and impeding those who hold the key to their firm's success. Their behavior should be condemned.

I will never be able to write a newsletter with advice to cover every possible situation you may encounter in the business world, but let's explore how to manage our references so as to keep us credible and competitive in the employment marketplace. We probably need to change our attitude and approach. Most of us, I suspect, pay scant attention to them until we are leaving or about to leave a company and probably lose contact with those from previous employment. We now need to cultivate and manage them on a continual, on-going basis, much as we do our networks. As many have already seen, the intersection or overlap between their personal network and their list of references is fairly common as is being hired or retained as a consultant by a former supervisor or co-worker. It's not unusual for someone who is a reference to hire you.

Here are some steps to take for the future:

- Treat your references as the significant career asset they are. Manage them and track them much as you would your investment portfolio.
- Cultivate more references than you think you may require, creating a reserve in the event that a key person disappears or meets an untimely demise. This is another means of building out your business network.
- Maintain regular periodic contact and continue your relationship with them. Where possible, offer to provide a reference for them, to give them further reason to stay connected with you.
- Ask for and exchange written references. Whenever possible and appropriate, obtain them on company letterhead, with the provider's signature element, showing her or his title. Store these both electronically and on paper. They may be very valuable in the future if you lose contact with the provider.
- Align your references not only with specific jobs, but also with consulting assignments and projects. Whether you have consulted independently or as part of a firm, make an attempt to cultivate two or three references from each major engagement. If possible, develop references who can address specifics, such as executive and leadership ability, industry knowledge, technical savvy, project management expertise and the like. Using a mix of former supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers and vendors will help you to do this.
- Though you may no longer work together, occasionally inform your reference providers of new experience, projects, consulting engagements, etc. This will allow them to position their comments and make them more favorable for you, e.g. "When s/he worked with me, they led this project. I

understand that they have subsequently expanded their role. Based upon what they did for me, I can see where this would be a logical step in their career, etc.”

- Use consulting clients as references only when they will add value to your next engagement or permanent position, determined by industry specialization, technology expertise or business problem resolution.
- If you are in the painful situation of being the lone recipient of discriminatory, exclusionary or abusive behavior that is corporately or departmentally inflicted, it may be difficult for you to cultivate positive references. If it is emanating from one person, such as your supervisor, then do your best to develop as many positive references as possible from peers at your level, peers at your manager’s level who know your work as well as customers/users and other stakeholders who can provide positive factual information.
- If one of your co-workers warrants a positive reference yet is the target of unprofessional or abusive behavior at the office, one of the best services you can do for them, is to offer to provide them with a work reference. This gesture alone may provide a source of strength for them, not only professionally, but also personally. The downside risk with this is that your co-worker may ask you to be a witness in a potential lawsuit. Seek professional advice for yourself before agreeing to do so.

Bear in mind that the longer you are in the workforce you may find it more difficult to maintain currency with references from your earlier days. So too, you may find it impossible to have an adequate number of references for every position and consulting engagement. If you have established a consistent track record over your career for delivering beyond expectation and being a solid team player, a missing reference or two won’t make much difference, especially if those you do provide give you an excellent report. Being unable to provide references to account for a significant portion of your career however may create doubt for a potential employer. Your references are people who will report on your job performance, accomplishments and interpersonal skills. While you probably will work at some time for and with a few people you would rather forget, if you are consistent in your professionalism and positive treatment of others during your career, you should be able to produce a sufficient number of quality references to satisfy a future employer. References, like network contacts are about relationships. If you take care of them, they will take care of you. These comments are my thoughts and by no means cover every possible situation. Please contact me at any time if you have additional questions.

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