

These Common Reference Myths Are Hurting Your Job Search

In the job search process, everyone recognizes the importance of having an up-to-date resume, a great cover letter and a professional LinkedIn profile page. While much time and effort is (and should be) spent on these aspects, many professionals do not put as much time and thought into their list of references as they should.

Often the lack of time and preparation put into professional references is due to common myths about them. In this article, we will debunk some of those myths and show you how to make your references a powerful tool to land your next job.

Myth No. 1: References are just a formality, they don't really matter. This is a surprisingly common mistake. Your list of references is actually a very important element of the job search process. Many candidates are taken out of the running after checking their references. When it comes down to the short list of possible candidates, reference checks could be the deciding factor in who gets the position.

When determining who could qualify to be your references, it's important to differentiate between professional and personal references. A professional reference can vouch for your professional qualifications and is someone you have worked with in the past in a more formal capacity (such as a job, but also serving on a board or leadership council for example). A personal reference can vouch for your character and isn't necessarily someone you have worked with. Often, both kinds of references are requested, but professional references tend to carry more weight with hiring managers.

Once you have compiled your list of references, it's important to ask for their permission to use them as references during your job search. Then, you should let them know each time you give their information to a hiring manager so they are prepared. Give them as many details about the job as possible, including the skills and qualifications required. They will be able to give a better recommendation if you prep them in advance. Let them know what company and position you are applying for, as well as the details about you and which of your specific abilities the hiring manager might be looking for.

Myth No. 2: Companies aren't allowed to say anything bad about you. There is a lot of confusion and misinformation about what a former employer or company is allowed to say about you. Many have the opinion that companies aren't allowed to say anything negative about former employees, but that's not always accurate

While each state has different laws about what information a company can disclose about their former employees, generally speaking, they can provide information about your professional conduct, whether or not you were fired and why. To find out what is allowed in your state, check the labor laws on your state's labor department website.

If you are concerned your previous employer may provide a bad reference, call them and ask them what information they would disclose if a hiring manager were to ask certain questions. If you are certain the reference will be negative, let the hiring manager know up front that you didn't have a positive experience at your last place of employment. Be straightforward, make sure that the details you provide will match what your previous employer will say, but limit the details to those that might impact your abilities as a possible employee.

Finally, make sure that your other references are solid. If the rest of your references are really good, the one bad reference will be less likely to hurt your chances.

Myth No. 3: Hiring managers will only contact the references you provided. While your list of references does carry a lot of weight, don't assume that hiring managers won't dig further. In today's world of networking, hiring managers are not limited to the references you have carefully hand-picked to vouch for you. They can easily look you up on LinkedIn and other social networks and discover a lot about your character and your other professional contacts.

When giving attention to your references during your job search, make sure you are also taking time to go over your social media profiles and your networking connections. Make sure your profile is up to date, that it accurately reflects the information on your resume and that those on your list of references are also in your professional network.

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