

# References & Recommendations



**References matter.** One enthusiastic, informed reference from a former supervisor can make the difference. Two or three can have an overwhelming effect. Employers don't have much to go on when they hire people and are fearful of making mistakes. Strong references make them more confident. Some people even go so far as to say that the resume gets you the interview, but good references can get you the job offer.

## **Is there a difference between a reference and a recommendation?**

After an employer has determined you have all the requirements for their opening, they'll often ask you to submit a list of **references** for them to call. Reference checks are a common part of the hiring process and serve two main purposes – to verify 1) your previous employment and, 2) your past work performance including your skills, abilities, work ethic and integrity. **Recommendations** are formal letters or evaluations written by your references that are submitted as part of your application. They are used most commonly for applications to graduate school, but are also occasionally requested for hiring.

## **TIPS FOR MANAGING REFERENCES**

### **1. Choose them wisely**

The strongest references come from previous employers who can vouch for your knowledge and skills, your integrity and your work ethic. Current and former supervisors, managers, co-workers or leaders of organizations are all acceptable as well as people you've been heavily involved with on volunteer-based projects.

Generally speaking, you should only use business references unless the employer asks for personal or character references. Don't use family members or friends unless they can truly speak to your work-related skills and qualifications.

An ideal slate of references for a recent college graduate might include:

- i. At least one recent immediate supervisor (from a summer or part-time job or internship)
- ii. At least one well-informed second-level supervisor or a club advisor
- iii. At least one professor

### **2. Get their permission/approval**

You always want to get a potential reference's blessing to use them so there are no surprises for you or for them.

### **3. Share your resume**

Each reference probably only knows one aspect of your experience – sharing your resume helps them to see a more complete picture of you and your experience. Also, having your resume gives the reference something to refer to when they actually get a call, and helps him/her send a consistent message to the employer about your experience.

### **4. Get their best contact info**

You need to get the best phone number, address and email for each reference and continually make sure those are up-to-date.

### **5. Protect them**

Do not submit reference names until you are asked. If you give your references up too early or too often, you risk your references getting calls they are not prepared for. Also you do not want them to be inundated with calls

from companies that may or may not have any real interest in hiring you. The fewer calls they have to take on your behalf, the more enthusiastic they will sound.

## **6. Keep them informed**

When you first ask someone to be a reference for you and give him/her a copy of your resume, you should also fill him/her in on the types of jobs and industries where you are focusing your job search. This will help them be the strongest reference for you when employers call.

Occasionally reach out and let your references know how your progress is going and what you're doing. Send them a holiday card. Nurture the relationship and connection. It makes it easier when you do send out their names and it keeps you fresh on their radar.

Every time you send out your reference sheet let your references know who is going to call, when to possibly expect a call and what job you're seeking. Sharing the job posting/description is helpful so that your reference can frame their comments around the skills and expectations for that particular job. Thank them ahead of time for their efforts.

## **7. Thank them**

Spending time communicating with your prospective employer takes valuable time away from your references' workdays. If you plan to use these positive references over the years, you need to give something back. For instance, each time your reference supports you with a new prospective employer, send them a personal thank you letter or (at minimum) an email.

If you win a new position, call or email your references and thank them again for their support. Also, let them know your new contact info.

## **8. Stay Connected**

As the saying goes – out of sight, out of mind. Honor these etiquette guidelines and your references should continue singing your praises for a long time. First, call your former boss(es)/references periodically and update them on your career, asking them to continue being a reference for you. Make sure you thank them for their time. Next, as you move further up the career ladder in your profession or achieve new educational goals, make sure your references stay abreast of your success. As you progress, a reference is more inclined to see you in a positive light. Finally, remember to ask your reference for updates on their own professional moves and changes.

## **YOUR REFERENCE PAGE**

- Never include references on your resume. Instead, prepare a separate sheet with the heading "Professional References" or something similar, and list three to five references under that heading.
- Be sure to include your name and contact info at the top of the page – just as it appears on your resume.
- Unless otherwise requested, use work addresses and phone numbers for your references. For each reference list the name, title, company or organization, company address and work phone number.
- If the person's title or company does not indicate your relationship, include in parentheses after name (e.g., former supervisor).
- Your Professional References should not be sent in the mail/fax/email with your cover letter and resume unless the employer specifically asks for them at that time.
- Employers typically ask for references after an interview, so bring a copy of your reference sheet to your interviews.

- Your reference sheet should be printed on the same paper as your resume. As with any other job search correspondence, take the time to make sure your reference sheet is of the highest quality. PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, and PROOFREAD again.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



- A. In general, the best letters of recommendation are from people who:
  - a. Have worked with you closely (e.g., research supervisor)
  - b. Have known you long enough to write with authority (e.g. academic advisor)
  - c. Have relevant expertise (e.g., professors in the case of academic applications)
  - d. Hold senior positions and are well known (e.g., departmental chair)
  - e. Have a positive opinion of you and your abilities
- B. Typically you will be asked for 3-4 letters.
  - a. Choice of letter writers is important so it's best to begin cultivating personal relationships with potential writers early on.
  - b. Once you have 3-4 writers in mind, ask each person if they are willing and feel able to write you a strong letter.
- C. Give your writers plenty of time.
  - a. A minimum of three to four weeks is customary and will allow you to check back a few days before the deadline to ensure the letter has been sent or faxed.
- D. Give your writers a well-organized, thorough packet of materials in a single envelope. Ideally, these elements should include some or all of the following items, depending on the letter's purpose:
  - a. A current copy of your academic transcript showing the courses you've taken and the level at which you've performed. This does not have to be an official copy.
  - b. A copy of your academic vita or resume.
  - c. A pre-addressed envelope for each letter with postage affixed if the letter is being sent via postal mail. If there are letters that should be returned to you in a sealed envelope, be sure to write your name and the school's name on the outside of each envelope.
  - d. Any forms that are supposed to be submitted with the letter. If there is a form, complete as much information as possible (everything except ratings, evaluative statements, signature and date).
  - e. A cover note briefly listing:
    - i. Your contact info
    - ii. A table or list of deadlines covering all the letters you need
    - iii. Your career aspirations and type of position or graduate program you are applying for
    - iv. Information or points you'd like your writer to emphasize
    - v. Summary of work/projects you did with or for your writer (including dates)
    - vi. Any other information you deem relevant
- E. Waiving your access to letters of recommendation
  - a. You should always agree to waive that right. Two reasons why:
    - i. One – If you don't waive the right, then whoever is reading the letter will assume the letter isn't being totally honest.
    - ii. Two – Many writers, by policy, do not write recommendation letters unless that clause is waived.
- F. Follow Up
  - a. Letters sometimes get lost, and people sometimes forget to write them. You should double-check that the letter has arrived, and if not, ask the writer to send another copy.
  - b. After you have completed your application/interview/etc., tell your letter writers the outcome. The letter writers care about you and want to know whether their letter was effective.

Furthermore, letter writers will often lobby directly on your behalf, but they will look silly (and you will look bad) if the letter writer isn't aware that this is moot because you already either had an interview or did not get the job.

- c. Always remember to thank your letter writers for their time and effort on your behalf.