

# New York ENTERPRISE REPORT APRIL 2009



WORKSMART

## 10 Tips for Meaningful Reference Checks

Cut through the BS and get the real back story on job candidates

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REFERENCE CHECKS CAN BE THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE hiring process. Catching bad apples before they spoil your barrel is a lot easier than dealing with the repercussions of a bad hire. While candidates may be well trained in the art of the interview, and resumes may be doctored, reference checks can provide a dose of reality about a candidate. When no candidate in his right mind is going to provide the name and number of someone who would be a negative reference, how can you get valuable information out of the references provided? The following 10 tips can help you extrapolate information from references that will be meaningful to your hiring decision-making process.

**1. Be thorough and un-rushed (this is not the time to cut corners).** Ask however many questions it takes to gain a detailed understanding of the candidate's past work environment, habits, and style. If possible, ask the reference to provide additional references.

**2. Try to break the ice, loosen-up and relax the reference.** This can be done by starting with some personal background or really easy (friendly) first questions, such as "How did you get into this line of work?" and "What do you enjoy about it?" It is important to make sure the reference is at ease: if they feel uneasy, they are more likely to leave a lot out.

**3. Emphasize the importance of the position.** If the reference understands how important the position is, they are more likely to be thorough and honest. I like to point out how critical this hire is to my growing business. References need to understand that you will not be able to afford to send your children to college and your business will fail if you hire the wrong person. Hopefully that will carry some weight in their decision on whether or not to share that one juicy detail.

**4. Ask how they met the candidate.** Just because they are co-workers doesn't mean they're not related. I have had candidates give a relative or former lover as a reference. This is also an easy way to gain insight into the way the candidate went about his or

her job search; was it organized and thorough, or a haphazard outreach to close friends?

**5. Confirm details such as employment dates, responsibilities, and reporting structure.** These details should match the details given during the interview; small discrepancies could be a symptom of a bigger problem.

**6. Ask how others would describe the candidate.** People are hesitant to say anything accusatory, but when asked about others they will often reveal new insights. Another way to ask this is to point out that you will be talking to lots of references, and ask what might be the worst thing you will hear.

**7. Ask about weaknesses, but frame it in an example of your own shortcomings.** By showing your own humility, it is easier to solicit candid answers. For example: "I am horrible at... As we build out the team, what are the weaknesses that we should be aware of?"

**8. As you wrap up, ask "Is there anything else we should know, or should have asked about?"** Sometimes the most damning information comes out after the "official" reference check is complete. Changing your tone to an informal wrap up may get them off the fence if there's any information they are holding back.

**9. Last Question, "Would you hire this person again?" Or "are they eligible for rehiring?"**

**10. Always thank the reference, and let them know you appreciate their help.** Their time is valuable, and their insights can be the key to effectively managing a new hire or avoiding bad hires, saving you both cash and frustration.