CAREER CENTER

References

References and Letters of Recommendation

Reference List

If you're interviewing for a job or applying to graduate school, references are a necessary component in the job application and interviewing process. Candidates can expect to have their references checked prior to getting an offer. Having good references can be the clincher to getting that new job. Serious candidates will need to acquire and maintain a list of references to be submitted upon request to prospective employers.

Plan ahead and compile a list of references and some letters of recommendation in advance, so that you are prepared when a prospective employer requests them. Collecting references at the last minute is strongly discouraged.

This reference list (or reference sheet) is a collection of the names of individuals who have agreed to offer positive or favorable recommendations to employers in your behalf. These individuals typically are former employers or faculty members or persons who have been in a position to have observed the quality of your work.

The standard reference list (or reference sheet) is comprised of three to five references. For each person listed on the reference list, the following identifying information should be included: full name of the reference person, title, department or function, name of institution, mailing address, telephone number, e-mail address.

Types of References

There are three types of references: professional, academic, personal. Generally, employers are interested in professional and academic references only.

Professional references are from the workplace and typical include former employers, supervisors, co-workers, clients or anyone the candidate has worked for or with. Academic references are from educational settings and typically include teachers, professors, faculty members or anyone the candidate has taken a class or course from. Personal references are character references and typically include advisors, counselors, mentors or anyone who has not been in a position to have directly observed the quality of your work.

Submitting References

References should never be listed on your resume. Typically references are submitted separately from your resume by using a document called a reference sheet or reference list. Unless otherwise directed, the best way to submit your references is in person at the conclusion of the first interview session.

A candidate’s references might also include actual letters of reference or letters of recommendation. These letters are positive commentaries or supportive remarks from former employers or teachers written in a letter format. Copies of these letters can be attached to the reference sheet or submitted individually or as a packet.

Selecting References

On the average, employers check three references for each candidate, so have at least that many ready to vouch for you. It's important to know your references, to select the right people, and to get their permission to use them. You need responsive people that can confirm that you worked there, your title, your reason for leaving, and other details.

It's also very important to have a good idea of what they are going to say about your background and your performance. It is acceptable to use employers, business acquaintances, supervisors, professors, customers, and co-workers as references. If you served as an intern, your supervisor could be a reference. If you served as a volunteer, consider using leaders or other members of the organization as references.

Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Don't ask "Could you write a letter of reference for me?" Just about anyone can write a letter. The problem can be what they are going to write about. Rather, ask "Do you feel you know my work well enough to write me a good recommendation letter?" or "Do you feel you could give me a good reference?" That way, your reference writer has an easy out if they are not comfortable writing a letter and you can be assured that those who say "yes" will be enthusiastic about your performance and will write a positive letter.

Observe proper etiquette. Be sure your request is a genuine “request.” Never be presumptuous. No employer or professor “owes” you a letter of recommendation. Proper protocol requires that you give the reference writer ample advanced notification when requesting a letter of recommendation. Give the faculty member enough time to write a good letter. Writing a letter of recommendation isn't easy. Good lead time on a letter of recommendation is 1 to 2 months. Last minute requests with a short lead time are highly inappropriate.

Help your reference writer by making the process as easy as possible. Offer to provide an updated copy of your resume, a transcript, and information on your skills and experiences so the reference writer has current information to work with. Do not relegate the logistic responsibility of this task to the reference writer. Provide contact information, addresses, and other logistical or administrative details. Don't forget to include relevant links and emails for online applications. Provide a recommendation form, template, or outline if necessary.

Grad School Note

Requesting letters of recommendation in person is preferred. You might consider arranging an appointment, explaining that you wish to discuss your plans to apply to graduate school. This gives the professor a heads up and a chance to think about whether he or she can write a helpful letter on your behalf. Be prepared to discuss the type of degree you seek, programs to which you are applying, how you arrived at your choices, goals for graduate study, future aspirations, and why you believe the faculty member is a good candidate to write a letter of your behalf.

Pay attention to signals that faculty member does not want to write a letter on your behalf. Anything other than a glowing letter can harm your application. You don't want a lukewarm letter (it’s the kiss of death). Take no for an answer. If a faculty declines to write you a recommendation letter, don't push it. He or she is doing you a favor.

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