

# 10 TIPS FOR BEING A JOB REFERENCE



~ Written in partnership with Diana Abath

- 1. Be aware.** Does your company have a reference policy? If so, consult the policy for details on serving as a reference or writing a reference letter. Can you be a reference regardless of your title? How much information can you provide? Are you permitted to use the company letterhead for a reference letter? Are there any non-employee restrictions? Knowing these and any other pertinent information before agreeing to be a reference can keep you out of trouble.
- 2. Be selective.** Avoid agreeing to be a reference for someone you aren't adequately familiar with (e.g., someone you only see at an annual conference). It's best to restrict serving as a reference for those individuals you've had an appropriate amount of time to establish a relationship and observe in a professional setting. Also consider the timing of your interactions. If you worked with the candidate for 5 years but that was 3 years ago, consider briefly chatting with him or her before deciding to act as a reference. Your reference reflects on you as well as the candidate, so don't be shy about being choosy.
- 3. Be honest.** Only say "yes" if you have the time and capacity to be a good reference. Ask the candidate how frequently you can expect to be contacted for reference checks. If your schedule is hectic, continuously receiving calls can quickly turn your helpful attitude into irritation. If you're asked to write a reference letter, can you submit it by the deadline? If not, it's best to decline.
- 4. Be considerate.** Just because someone asks you to be a reference, doesn't mean you have to agree to give one. Regardless of your rationale for saying yes or no, it's important to let candidates know as soon as you can - don't leave them hanging. If you're not able to, they may need to approach someone else.
- 5. Be knowledgeable.** Make sure you have adequate knowledge of the candidate's work background, work ethic, skills, abilities, achievements, and character. Ask for a copy of the candidate's up-to-date resume and the job posting. Consult with the candidate to fill any information gaps (e.g., candidate's goals and current/recent work situation).
- 6. Be contextual.** Were you the candidate's colleague, co-worker, supervisor, academic advisor, or customer? How long was your professional relationship? In your reference, discuss the candidate's attributes, skills, and accomplishments from your perspective within the circumstances and time frame that you worked together.
- 7. Be specific and concise.** Answer all questions you're asked as directly as possible, linking to the candidate's relevant abilities, attitude, etc. Give brief but powerful examples whenever you can; prepare a few anecdotes to share in advance (e.g., "Joyce coordinated the logistics for our national conference in 2 months; with a great attitude, she managed over 200 vendors").
- 8. Be comparative.** When someone is making a career transition, it's important for references to communicate the candidate's **transferable skills**. Make it easy for the potential employer to see the link from your previous experience with the candidate and the current position.
- 9. Be coachable.** If you're asked to be a reference but have never given or written one, let the candidate know before agreeing. If the candidate still feels you're a good fit, use a reference letter [template](#) or ask the candidate to provide some items he/she'd like you to comment on. Research common reference check [questions](#) and practice your responses. Ask others who have been references for advice.
- 10. Be professional.** Your behaviour is a reflection on the candidate's character. Avoid speaking negatively about the candidate's past employers, just as you would if you were interviewing for a job. Also keep in mind that long letters touting the candidate's endless attributes or keeping the interviewer on the phone with glorifying stories for hours won't reflect well. Being asked to be a reference can be an honour so put your very best foot forward for the candidate's success!

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