



EDMONDS SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 15 Human Resources Division

September 2007

REFERENCE CHECKING

II-C

Sometime toward the end of the hiring process, usually after identifying the finalist(s) and always BEFORE making a job offer, the supervisor of the position checks references. Reference checks are done to confirm information you already have about the candidate, and to uncover any problem areas you might have missed in your selection process up to that point. Letters of recommendation should never substitute for reference checks, and reference checks should always be done in person (e.g., site visits) or by phone. You will need to do extensive reference checking for all positions for which you hire. Remember that an employee who stays with the district for twenty-five years at an average salary plus benefits of \$45,000 will, in the course of a career, cost the district \$1,125,000.

Inform interviewees that you will be checking references and/or former employees to verify information provided in the application and interview and that it is their responsibility to help you do so.

In doing reference checks, remember:

- **Always check at least two references.** Any one person may have a biased view (either positive or negative). You want to obtain as much objective, corroborated information as possible before making the very important (and expensive) hiring decision.
- **Check references not listed by the individual, in addition to those listed.** The candidate may have given you only names of supporters. More diversity will garner you better information.
- **Ask each reference the same questions.** This will give you an "apples to apples" basis for comparison.
- **Where possible, check with supervisor, co-workers, and (where applicable) subordinates and others.** Get a perspective from a variety of points in the organizational structure. A supervisor may believe the employee is a good manager; the subordinate's assessment may be different. Where applicable, talk with parents, community contacts and others who may have had interactions with the candidate in a work setting.
- **Contact the Human Resources or personnel office of previous employers.** It is important to verify previous employment dates and positions and to determine if previous employees would rehire the applicant. If there are reasons not to rehire, often the Human Resources or personnel office is authorized to release such information. If you feel you are not getting the information you need, contact the appropriate Human Resources Director for assistance.
- **Restrict your references to work-related contacts.** Family members, friends, ministers or other non-work related contacts are not appropriate references. Candidates new to the work force may not have had a previous supervisor, but may have done volunteer work, student teaching or have participated in other community activities. In this case, talk with supervisors, supervising teachers, or activity coordinators.

- **Ask only questions directly related to the requirements of the position you are filling.** When asking questions, look for behaviors of the applicant, and how well those behaviors match what you are seeking for the position. If a reference states that the applicant is bright, find out what that means in behavioral terms--the reference's definition of "bright" may not be the same as yours. The questions you ask may parallel the questions in the interview, and should cover technical areas (knowledge, skills), personal characteristics (punctuality, attendance), interpersonal skills, and any critical aspects of the job (see sample questions). Ask questions in behavioral terms, e.g. "How many times was he late to work last year?" rather than "How's his punctuality?" Take good notes during the conversation.
- **Ask only legal questions.** The laws governing illegal topics for interviews extend to reference checks. Therefore, do not ask questions about race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, creed, religion, marital status, dependents/child care, age, disability or veteran status.
- **Ask only useful questions.** Be specific and behavioral in your questions, and concentrate on getting examples of past performance as they relate to the position you are filling. Questions about strengths and weaknesses, yes/no questions which generate opinion but do not get at descriptions of behavior and general questions like "How do you rate her overall job performance?" will not garner useful information.
- **Submit reference information, together with your documentation from the interview process, to the Human Resources office.** Reference checks are part of the selection process, and as such are subject to civil rights complaints, grievances, and lawsuits. This documentation protects you and the district (name, title, and phone number of reference, date of contact, questions asked and notations of responses). Human Resources keeps these records for at least three years.

When you have completed your checking, compare the responses you received from various references. Is there consistency between/among them? If not, is there an explanation for the lack of consistency?

Finally, use the reference check information, together with information from the application material, interview process and any other selection information to identify the best match for the position you are filling.



The following are some sample questions you might want to use during a reference check. Make sure the questions relate to the requirements of the position and that you are comfortable with the way they are phrased.

GENERAL AREAS

1. Here are some skill/knowledge requirements of this position. *(Example: Read each job responsibility and/or qualification statement from the job announcement and ask the reference person to rate the applicant on a scale of 1-10 for each.)*

2. What causes this candidate stress (*for jobs where skill in dealing with stress is a requirement*)? How do you know when he/she is under stress? Give some examples of what you have seen. How often does this happen?
3. Was getting to work on time a requirement of the position when you knew the candidate? If yes, how often was the candidate late last year? By how much?
4. Describe a situation where the candidate was required to meet a deadline. What was involved in doing the work? Was the candidate successful?
5. Give me some examples of how the candidate dealt with supervisory direction and constructive criticism.
6. Describe the candidate's supervisory style (for supervisory positions). When did it work best? What happened when it did not work? What kinds of people seem to respond well to this style? Which ones have trouble with it?
7. What evidence do you have to indicate whether this candidate would or would not be successful in a position requiring strict attention to detail?
8. What evidence do you have to indicate whether this candidate would or would not be successful in a position requiring the performance of repetitive, tedious tasks?
9. Would you hire this person again? Why or why not?
10. Concluding question: Is there anything you would like to add? (*Caution: If the reference begins to discuss any of the illegal areas, stop or redirect the conversation. You do not want to end up in a situation where you are accused of refusing to hire someone because you had illegal information.*)
11. Can you give me the name of anyone else in your organization who worked closely enough with the candidate to provide insightful information?

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS/TEAMWORK

1. How would you characterize the candidate's ability to work with others? Please give me an example of a difficult interpersonal situation with a teacher (student/administrator/parent/staff member) in which the candidate was involved, and how he/she handled it. What skills did the candidate demonstrate (or fail to demonstrate) in this situation? Is this example typical of how he/she handled similar situations?
2. Have you ever seen this candidate work in a team setting? What role did he/she take? What makes you think that he/she was or was not successful in this setting?
3. How do you think this candidate would react to students of _____ age? What have you seen this candidate do that makes you say that?

REFERENCE CHECKING FORMS ARE AVAILABLE IN HUMAN RESOURCES