



Umbrella Summary

Reference Checks

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are reference checks?

Reference checks are hiring tools, typically used as one of the last steps in the hiring process. “A reference check generally involves contacting applicants’ former employers, supervisors, co-workers, and educators to verify previous employment and to obtain information about the individual’s knowledge, skills, abilities and character” (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020, p. 1). For example, potential employers use this as an opportunity to get additional information about applicants’ job performance, communication, time management, teamwork, professionalism; honesty; and attention to detail (Hendricks, Rupayana, Puchalski, & Robie, 2018).

The questions used on reference checks depend on the specific job requirements and areas in which a reference would have had an opportunity to observe the applicant (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2005). Example questions include: “Could you give me a brief description of the duties the candidate performed?” “What were the candidate’s strengths?” “What were the candidate’s weaknesses or areas where the candidate could improve?” “How would you describe the candidate’s relationships with coworkers, subordinates, and supervisors?” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.).

Most organizations complete reference checks as part of their hiring process. (Society for Human Resource Management, 2017). Nonetheless, there are many differences in the approach and information received (Hendricks et al., 2018; Schmidt, Oh, & Shaffer, 2016; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2005; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.):

- Person conducting the reference checks (hiring manager, human resources representative)
- Mode of communication (in person, over the phone, or in writing)
- Length (typically somewhere between 5 and 60 minutes)
- Number of questions
- Focus of the questions (e.g., verifying candidate’s assertions, past performance, skills/abilities)
- Format (ratings, open-ended questions)
- Degree of structure and standardization (varying questions across references and candidates or using the same set of questions for all references and candidates)
- Timing of the reference check (typically just prior to making offers of employment or after an offer that is contingent on the results of the reference check)

- Number of references contacted (often between one and five, but typically three)
- Extent to which the candidate provides consent (e.g., no consent, candidate provides a list of references, candidate provides written consent for the prospective employer to contact specific references)
- Extent to which former employers provide information (e.g., refusing to participate; providing only job title and dates of employment; or providing more insightful information such as job performance, the reason for the candidate's departure, or whether the candidate is eligible for rehire)

To some extent, the difference in the amount of information former employers are willing to provide stems from changes in the legal landscape (Cooper, 2001; Woska, 2007). In the 1970s and 1980s, some people sued their former employers regarding the reference given to prospective employers. Lawsuits tended to focus on defamation or breach of privacy. There were also lawsuits against former employers who gave references but did not disclose safety concerns associated with the former employee. Then, organizations stopped participating in reference checks or agreed only to verify employment. In response, many states enacted laws protecting former employers who give honest, good-faith references. Although some organizations now give robust references, the shift back to this level of comfort has been slow. More structure and guidance may provide increased comfort: "Liability avoidance may be achieved when employers establish uniform procedures for responding to reference inquiries and coordinate with counsel in designing waivers and releases for reference and background investigations" (Woska, 2007, p. 88).

Why are reference checks valuable?

Reference checks are valuable because they are moderately associated with job performance (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). They are also viewed favorably by candidates (Anderson, Salgado, & Hulsheger, 2010). There is no meta-analytic evidence of the connection between reference checks and other workforce outcomes, such as employee attitudes or turnover.

Given the vast differences in the way that reference checks are implemented as well as the limited research regarding the link between reference checks and outcomes of interest, further evaluation is needed. For example, it would help to know the connection between reference checks and other workforce outcomes, determine how much information employers are giving, and explore whether the kind of information received changes the association between reference checks and job performance. A great starting point may be to explore the different ways in which child welfare agencies perform reference checks and evaluate the extent to which those differences are associated with hiring decisions, subsequent performance, employee attitudes, and turnover.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Reference checks can differ across many factors (e.g., who completes the reference check, how many references are contacted).
- ▶ Reference checks can be useful hiring tools that lead to higher performance among new hires.
- ▶ Reference checks are viewed favorably by candidates.
- ▶ The effectiveness of a reference check may depend on the amount of information provided by the previous employer. More research is needed to determine if this is true.
- ▶ Reference checks are not intended to improve turnover, and there are no meta-analyses assessing that connection. Because they lead to better performance, however, it is possible that use of reference checks may reduce involuntary turnover caused by poor performance.
- ▶ A reference check should be developed on the basis of a job analysis and, as with all hiring assessments, should not target knowledge, skills, or situations that will be covered in training.
- ▶ As a decision point in the hiring process, reference checks are subject to certain professional and legal guidelines. It is recommended that agencies consult with an expert for assistance.

References

Anderson, N., Salgado, J. F., & Hulsheger, U. R. (2010). Applicant reactions in selection: Comprehensive meta-analysis into reaction generalization versus situational specificity. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, *18*, 291–304.

Cooper, M. D. (2001). Job reference immunity statutes: Prevalent but irrelevant. *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy*, *11*, 1–68.

Hendricks, C. A., Rupayana, D., Puchalski, L., & Robie, C. (2018). Content of qualitative feedback provided during structured, confidential reference checks. *Personnel Assessment and Decisions*, *4*, 41–54.

Hunter, J. E., & Hunter, R. F. (1984). Validity and utility of alternative predictors of job performance. *Psychological Bulletin*, *96*, 72–98.

Schmidt, F. L., Oh, I-S., & Shaffer, J. A. (2016). *The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 100 years of research findings*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309203898>

Society for Human Resource Management. (2017). *2017 talent acquisition benchmarking report*. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2017-Talent-Acquisition-Benchmarking.pdf>

Society for Human Resource Management. (2020). *Conducting background investigations and reference checks*. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/conductingbackgroundinvestigations.aspx>

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2005). *Reference checking in federal hiring: Making the call*.

<https://www.mspb.gov/netsearch/viewdocs.aspx?docnumber=224106&version=224325&application=ACROBAT>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (n.d.). *Reference checking guide*.

<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/assessment-and-selection/other-assessment-methods/referencechecking.pdf>

Woska, W. J. (2007). Legal issues for HR professionals: Reference checking/background investigations. *Public Personnel Management*, 36, 79–89.

Author(s)

Tara Myers, PhD, Independent Consultant

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Suggested Citation

Myers, T., & Paul, M. (2020, December 23). *Umbrella summary: Reference checks*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/reference-checks>

For more information about the QIC-WD, visit qic-wd.org or contact: Michelle Graef, Project Director, at mgraef1@unl.edu.

This Summary was developed with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Grant #HHS-2016-ACF-ACYF-CT-1178. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.