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What You Should & Shouldn't Do WHEN CHECKING REFERENCES

Checking references when hiring employees or enlisting a new volunteer is one of the most effective ways we can protect our people and organizations. As with most activities it is not enough to go through the motions but rather we should be effective in our process using good questions, listening for changes in tone and hesitation.

Below are some guidelines that can help you develop your reference checking best practices as well as some sample questions when calling references.



- **Make a list of questions to ask.** You might be confident in your ability to strike up conversation, but a list of questions will help you stay concise and on topic. You will ask more effective questions if you have a plan.
- **Politely introduce yourself, your organization and why you're calling.** Then state a time limit for the call. You can simply say, "Do you have just a few minutes for a quick discussion of the candidate's history with you?" This will keep you on track and let the reference person plan their answers accordingly.
- **Ask open-ended questions when you call the reference.** This strategy will facilitate conversation and allow for precise, detailed information on the history and experience of the potential volunteer. For instance, instead of asking, "The application says you've known the candidate for 10 years. Is this right?" ask the question: "About how long have you known the candidate?"
- **Ask questions specific to the work the candidate will be doing.** If they will be working with children, ask the reference, "Is the candidate comfortable working with children? Please give examples."
- **Ask the reference if there is any reason you should be uncomfortable allowing the candidate to work with children.** They do not need to provide evidence for their feelings or response. Listen for change in tone or hesitation.



- **Thank them for their time and invite them to follow up if they think of something that should have been mentioned.** It's hard to drum up the entire history of a relationship in a few minutes of conversation, so invite them to email or call if they remember something important.

DON'T

- **Do not be unprepared.** No matter how self-assured you are in your ability to speak to strangers, prepare questions before calling a candidate's references.
- **Avoid asking off-topic, closed-ended questions at all cost.** These types of questions will not provide you with the information you need. Focus on the details that are needed and avoid questions such as, "Was he a good employee?" Instead, ask, "What were the candidate's strengths as an employee?" If the volunteer candidate is going to be working at a soup kitchen, their typing speed or history class participation grade would not be relevant to the work they would do. Focus on the details that matter most.
- **If the conversation starts to get off topic, reel it in.** Some people like to talk and have a conversation. Have a plan in case the reference begins to overload on details from a small part of the candidate's past that does not pertain to the reference check.
- **Do not only verify the bare minimum.** Go deeper than just the dates and bullet-points in the volunteer candidate's reference section. The basics are important but this is the time to also find out more valuable insights about the volunteer candidate's overall character.

SOURCE: based on article by Verified Volunteers

Sample Questions:

- What were the person's responsibilities?
- Will the volunteer be able to do the work I am asking of him/her?
- How did he or she deal with any responsibility for handling cash, interacting with children, maintaining confidential information or driving a car? **NOTE:** This question should be tailored to address the sensitive tasks the volunteer may be handling in your organization.
- How do you know this person, and for how long? **NOTE:** A reference to a short interaction from several years ago could be a sign that the person lacks other, more recent references.
- How did the relationship end? **NOTE:** If the person appears to have failed to follow through on past obligations, ask for detail.
- Have conflicts arisen between the two of you, and how were they resolved?
- Do you know whether this person has had any financial difficulties, or history of drug or alcohol abuse?
- Have you ever been in a car with this person driving? **NOTE:** Ask for more than a thumbs-up or down, but a description of the person's driving abilities and whether the reference had any concerns as a passenger.
- Is there any reason you would feel uncomfortable allowing this person to supervise children? **NOTE:** Listen for hesitation or change in tone of voice.
- Can you describe situations where this person was trustworthy and reliable — or not?
- Is there anything else I should know about? **NOTE:** Again, be alert to the reference's tone of voice and any hesitation.

SOURCE: based on article by Ilona Bray, J.D. on Nolo.com

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