HR Connect

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REFERENCE CHECKING AND PROVIDING REFERENCES

The subject of checking a potential employee's references is important enough to expand on in this issue of the HR Connect. The topic of reference checks in Issue #16 (December 2003), we reviewed some facts about "Checking References." We also provided additional "Best Practices" and Archdiocesan resources links regarding reference checks in Issue #45 (December 2006). The objectives of this issue are to provide the rational of conducting reference checks, identify several "tools" for your use in conducting reference checks and thirdly, provide suggestions of what you might learn when conducting a reference check.

The Rational of Conducting Reference Checks

Reference checks are intended to confirm what you have learned about a candidate through the review of the potential employee's resume, application and interview(s). Reference checks should be directed to individuals who know the candidate on a professional basis, i.e., the candidate's supervisor/manager of the candidate's most recent previous employer, the other "relevant" prior employers, when the candidate's experience appears to be similar to the type of work you expect the candidate to perform for you. If the candidate is applying for an Admin Assistant/Receptionist position and has most recently worked in "Sales" but has prior experience as an Admin Assistant, we may be able to learn relevant information from contacting the employer where the Admin work was preformed. The "sales experience" information may not be relevant to the position for which he/she is being considered.

Letters of reference provided by a candidate are usually of little value as the letters were probably written as a generic overview of the individual's activities. Most often, the "letters of recommendation" are written very generally aiming to please any employer for almost any position. Occasionally, the letters may include some relevant comments, but much more can be usually be learned by personally contacting the relevant prior employers.

The reference call to the candidate's prior employer should include questions that will prompt the reference giver to provide examples of the potential employee's relevant experience that would help in the decisions and activities of the position they are being considered for. **Important:** *Be sure that you do reference checks with The Office of Human Resources and with any prior Archdiocesan location. Recently, several "undesirable" individuals have slipped back into employment with the Archdiocese because no reference check was conducted.* During a reference check, you have the opportunity to confirm what the candidate claimed to have accomplished. As an example, a candidate may have indicated that he or she was "responsible for bookkeeping." You may be able to confirm the specifics of that "responsibility" and how complex the bookkeeping actually was for that employer. Was the bookkeeping done manually? If a computer software application was used, was it done using Microsoft Excel? How complex was the bookkeeping?

(Please turn over)

Identify Several “Tools” for Your Use in Conducting Reference Checks

One of the best tools to use as a guide when conducting reference checks is the specific **Position Description** that the candidate is applying for. Within that position description, identify the top three of four responsibilities that are most important for the candidate to absolutely be able to perform proficiently. You may want to develop two or three questions based on the duties of the Position Description to ask the Reference. If the candidate’s experience at the prior employer turns out not to be in sync with what the candidate told you during the interview or you find out more about the complexity of lack thereof, you now have more information to help you make a decision about hiring that candidate.

As you may know, it is a very important part of the hiring process to have all candidates complete an application when they are considered a candidate that you are interested in. If you do not have the Archdiocesan Application form, please contact us at 415.614.5540. Note that the application becomes a legally binding document when signed as intended, certifying that it is accurate and complete. Any discrepancy between the candidate’s resume and the candidate’s completed and signed application is important to resolve. If there are discrepancies, you should attempt to resolve the discrepancies with the candidate. The application includes a section asking for names and contact information of prior employers. Candidates should be advised to complete that section and not use the comment: “See resume.” Those prior employer contacts should be included in your reference check as opposed to using only the “References” that the potential employee may submit.

Suggestions of What Information You Might Learn When Conducting a Reference Check

Don’t be surprised if the “Reference” directs your call to someone in his or her Human Resources Department. Many organizations have a policy that only HR will provide references and then only “dates of employment” and “last salary” may be given. However, it is our due diligence to attempt to confirm the candidate’s background by doing reference checks. Please see Issue #45 (September 2006) for more questions to ask.

1. How long have you known _______________ and in what relationship?
2. What was ______’s title and final compensation when he/she last worked for you?
3. What are _______’s 3 most outstanding qualities?
4. This is a position that requires competence in (___________), (__________) and (__________). Can you comment on _______’s abilities with regard to these three competencies?
5. Why did ________ leave his/her position?
6. Do you know of anything in __________’s work habits that could be problematic to a future employer?
7. Is ______ eligible for rehire?

Providing Reference Information on Prior Employees

Archdiocesan Policy allows us to provide reference information on prior Archdiocesan Employees in some cases, however, great caution should be used. If we disclose some positive information but fail to mention negative things, we can be liable if it looks like we were "covering up" or "misrepresenting" the facts. On the opposite end, if we are "too" frank about negative things, but in a way that is false, misleading or incomplete, we can be liable to the former employee for "defamation." The safest course is to stick to stating that our routine procedure is simply to confirm the fact of employment, the job position and the dates, and nothing more. If *objective and neutral* facts are asked for and can be given in addition (e.g., "He wasn't fired, but quit because he said he was moving to Oregon") then that's fine too. But resist the temptation to provide more information about job performance or other issues, and especially resist the temptation to gossip, justify a termination decision, evaluate past performance or just complain, etc. For example: Don't discuss his personality flaws or hygiene problems. Don't express your opinion about her lack of intelligence or ambition. Above all, NEVER say or write anything about a former employee -- whether negative or positive -- which isn't absolutely and demonstrably true and complete. If you find yourself in a situation where a recommendation is asked for (either by the employee or by a prospective employer) and you wish to cooperate, please consult with Human Resources first.

If you feel that any of these areas need more attention in your parish, please call us at (415) 614-5540 and we will do our best to assist you.