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Reference Checking and the Search for Red Flags

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The recruiting process is loaded with red flags, and hiring managers have to be diligent in finding them.

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It's a classic tale for hiring managers: manager meets candidate; manager likes candidate; candidate likes job; candidate is not everything he or she seems – everybody's time is wasted.

The recruiting process is loaded with red flags, and hiring managers have to be diligent in finding them. A candidate's flaws – whether it's inexperience, a deficiency in their skill set or questionable integrity – usually do not appear on the resume and they might not even be uncovered during the interview process. Often, the reference checks are the last line of defense in vetting the right man or woman for the job.

But just because you think it's important, does not mean that the reference source given by the candidate shares your concern. In many cases, they might fear the legal implications of divulging information or that their comments will not be kept confidential. To get the most accurate assessment, it is important to go into the phone call with a carefully crafted plan.

It begins with the jobseeker. Ask for his or her former direct supervisors' names, titles and direct phone numbers and then ask the candidate what kind of endorsements you should expect upon calling them. This sets up a frame of reference for when you call and allows you to see how similar the boss's perspective is to that of the applicant. It might be even better than you were lead to believe, and that's great. However, even the slightest discrepancy can be a red flag.

**TO MAKE REFERENCE CHECKING SOMEWHAT EASIER,
CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING TIPS:**

1. Get the applicant's version
2. Talk to the applicant's manager before talking to Human Resources
3. Establish rapport with a conversational tone
4. Ask the direct supervisor about "safe" information first
5. Never use the words "reference check"
6. Ask for "areas of improvement" last

Supervisors can be the best references because they are the ones directly responsible for the applicant's work; however, talking to the supervisor can be very delicate. They might resent losing the employee or have some other bias toward him or her. Still, the supervisor's insight is probably more valuable than a human resources manager who may have no relationship with this particular candidate.

It's best not to jump right in and seek personal opinions. Rather, the first few questions should resemble a Joe Friday interrogation – just the facts. Don't ask the supervisor if he or she likes the employee. In fact, don't even use the words "reference check." For instance, you can say "John said I should call you about the work he did for you at General Electric. Do you have just a moment to chat?" Then, give them information about who you are and describe the position under consideration. You want to build rapport and make the supervisor feel safe divulging information. The more they feel they know about you, the more legitimate your questions will be for them.

A general rule of thumb is to ask three basic questions in order of the "safest" information first, such as what they like about the candidate and what types of hard skills they used on the job. Areas of improvement should be asked about last because people are more likely to be honest about this after they have praised the candidate. It makes them feel they are being fair. The three basic questions are:

1. What are John's best qualities as an employee?
2. If you were to give advice to John's next employer about how to manage him for optimal performance, what would you suggest?
3. If John needed to improve in one area, what might that be?

Be sure to listen to the tone of voice, level of enthusiasm, hesitations and most importantly what they *don't* say. Use follow-up questions such as "how so?" or "can you be more specific about that?"

Remember, there can be good and bad employers and supervisors, and part of your job is to evaluate their ability to be a fair judge of the candidate's skills and abilities. This is why you must always start by asking the candidate what he or she expects this person to say, and why you must also talk to enough people to see patterns and develop a general idea about each potential candidate.

Red flags can save everyone valuable time and money. You just have to know how to find them.

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