

Selecting and preparing professional references

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Careful selection and preparation of reference persons can bring stronger job recommendations.

WHEN APPLYING for a nursing job at a hospital, Gina Lawson, RN, provides the name of a former nursing school professor—we'll call her Lynn Reynolds—as a reference. The hospital's hiring manager calls Professor Reynolds to check Gina's references, only to find that she doesn't recognize Gina's name. After an awkward silence as the professor struggles to remember Gina Lawson, the hiring manager offers assistance, stating, "Perhaps you knew her as Gina Jones before her marriage."

Yes—the professor does remember Gina Jones. She was a nursing student she worked with in a faculty role before Gina graduated 2 years ago. Professor Reynolds tells the hiring manager, "She was a top-notch student, but I haven't heard from her since graduation so I can't offer more current information."

When applying for a job, applicants normally provide contact information for references so potential employers can reach them. But as the above scenario shows, in some cases the person who's contacted as a reference isn't able to offer a strong recommendation because she has been out of touch with the job applicant. This article highlights important steps to ensure you receive the strongest recommendations possible for the job you're seeking.

Criteria for selecting references

Most prospective employers request two or three professional references from individuals who can speak to the applicant's specific knowledge base, skillset, or character related to the job requirements. If you catalog your contacts throughout your professional journey, you'll have an easier time choosing the best references.

Of course, references from current and former employers or colleagues are always desirable. But if your work history is limited or unrelated to the specific skillset required, consider using contacts from academia, professional organizations you're involved in, or volunteer activities. For new graduates, the most appropriate reference individuals may be professors, clinical

preceptors, and professional mentors.

To decide whom to contact as potential references, consider which individuals could best address your ability to meet the job requirements. They should be able to project a positive yet reasonable image of your abilities and competencies without overblown embellishments or heightened praise, which could hinder a new work relationship by establishing unreasonable expectations. Also, consider whether the time elapsed since your last contact with that person might alter his or her ability to provide a recommendation.

Contacting and preparing potential references

Once you've identified individuals you think can give the strongest recommendations, contact them to ask if they'd be willing to provide a reference for you. The better prepared they are for a phone call, letter, or email from a prospective employer, the stronger their recommendation is likely to be.

When you graduated from nursing school, perhaps a professor offered to serve as a reference whenever necessary; a past employer may have made the same offer. Keep in mind, though, that these offers aren't excuses for not contacting those people before you list them as references.

What to say

When contacting someone to provide a reference, describe the job you're applying for, its requirements, and how that person could speak to those requirements. If a prospective employer puts more emphasis on particular character traits than technical skills, highlight examples of how you've demonstrated the desired traits. Be sure to provide your most current résumé or curriculum vitae.

As appropriate, include other information and documents that might aid your potential references. For example, former employers might benefit from reviewing a performance evaluation they conducted when you worked for them or letters of commendation about your work performance from patients or colleagues. Former professors might want to see clinical evaluations from preceptors or your own self-evaluations. If you believe these items would be help-

ful, send them to the individual. Even if you think he or she can access these documents readily, providing them eliminates the time they'd need to spend searching for them—and this increases the chance they'll be able to review those items before a prospective employer calls.

If you know the name of the person at the hiring organization who will be checking your references, give that name to your reference persons, along with the anticipated time frame and mode of contact. The hiring organization may use a contact mode that's not preferred by your selected reference. For example, the organization may prefer to send recommendation forms by fax, yet the reference person may have limited access to a fax machine. Conveying this information may result in a more timely response when your references are contacted.

Finally, as the opening scenario illustrated, you may be going by a name other than the one your references know you as. Maybe your surname has changed, you gained or lost a nickname over the years, or you're using your middle name now instead of your first name. Be sure to update your references about your current name.

Following up

The final step is to follow up. Send a brief note to all

individuals who served as references, thanking them for their time and updating them on your job search outcome. If you need additional recommendations, use this as an opportunity to request them.

Selecting and preparing professional references are essential components of a job search. Thoughtful attention to whom you select and thorough preparation of these individuals can help ensure you receive appropriate, strong, and timely recommendations. Devoting adequate time to this process can give you the edge you need to get the job you want in today's competitive healthcare hiring environment. ★

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