
Employment reference check questions

Use these sample **employment reference check questions** during your hiring process to gather information on your candidates' past job performance from former employers and coworkers.

Learn more about:

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- Employment reference check questions
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Why you should conduct a reference check

Candidates present themselves positively on their resumes and during interviews. A candidate's references can give you more objective information about their performance. Before [extending a job offer](#), consider getting references from former employees, co-workers and business partners (e.g. clients.)

Conduct reference checks to:

- **Ensure you're getting accurate information.** Confirm resume data, like employment dates, jobs, job titles and responsibilities.
- **Learn about candidates previous work experiences.** Understand how candidates use their skills on the job directly from professional references who have worked with them in the past.
- **Find out how candidates work with others.** Use reference checks to learn about candidates' work relationships with managers, colleagues, direct reports and clients.
- **Spot red flags.** Reference checks can shine a light on alarming past behaviors. Use this information to make a more informed hiring decision.

Employment reference check questions

- When did [*Candidate_name*] work at your company and what was their job title?
- In what capacity did you know or work with [*Candidate_name*]?
- Why did [*Candidate_name*] leave your company?
- What were [*Candidate_name*'s] main responsibilities?
- Could you mention one or two group projects [*Candidate_name*] was involved in? What

was their role and how did they collaborate with their colleagues?

- How did [Candidate_name] respond to feedback?
- Name two or three of [Candidate_name's] strengths and weaknesses.
- What skills do you think [Candidate_name] could further develop?
- How did [Candidate_name] handle stressful situations? Please give specific examples.
- What was [Candidate_name's] management style? Describe a time when [Candidate_name] managed a conflict among team members.
- Were there any behaviors that impacted [Candidate_name's] job performance? (e.g. being late, missing deadlines or arguing with colleagues)
- Do you think [Candidate_name] could take on a more senior role? Why or why not?
- Given the opportunity, would you rehire [Candidate_name]?

How to conduct a reference check

- Use reference checks during the final hiring stage before extending a job offer to a potential new employee. To be more objective in your hiring process, ask the same questions for references of all shortlisted candidates.
- Inform candidates that you'll check references in advance. You can note that in your job ad and ask candidates to provide some people as references after the screening stage.
- Evaluate information you get through reference checks in relation to your position. You don't need to become alarmed if a candidate lacks a nice-to-have skill that's not among your key requirements. However, qualities such as good communication skills and dependability are key pieces of information for most positions.
- Tailor your questions to the relationship the person you're talking to had with the candidate. For example, a former employer could get specific about the candidate's job performance, while a former colleague could comment on the candidate's collaboration skills.
- A reference call is quick, gives you the chance to ask follow up questions and allows you to better understand your interlocutor by the tone of their voice. But, sending your questions via email is a good alternative in case that works best for your candidate's former employer or colleague.
- If you spot small discrepancies during a reference check, discuss them with the candidate. For example, an inaccurate employment date could simply be a typo on the candidate's resume.

Red flags during background checks

- **Negative comments.** Candidates typically provide a list of references who they know will speak highly of them. Any negative feedback from references about a candidate's work performance it's something you should seriously consider before making a hiring decision.
- **Lack of specificity.** You can expect an overly positive review from references. After all, these are people the candidate trusts to vouch for them in a job interview. When faced with

overselling, press for specifics. If former employers or colleagues can't point to work experiences that back up their claims, or list any areas of improvement, then there might not be enough experience there to learn about.

- **Inconsistencies in factual information.** Small inaccuracies (e.g. exact date of employment) might not be a reason to raise a [red flag](#). But, if you find that a candidate is lying about more important issues, like their scope of responsibilities, consider it a warning sign about their reliability.

Challenges during reference checks

- **Lack of trust:** Some people may be hesitant to disclose information about their former co-worker. Reassure them that the call is confidential and explain that this is about getting to know the candidate better.
- **Lack of objectiveness:** Some employers might hold grudges against employees who left their company. Or, others could exaggerate their skills, if their collaboration ended on a positive note. To reduce bias, ask for specific examples that show the employee's performance and behavior in the workplace.
- **Lack of time:** Former employers and coworkers might have limited time to answer your questions. So, keep a reference check call short, at the maximum 10 to 15 minutes. Or, suggest coordinating via email.

Reference check questions you can't ask

Although some inquiries may seem helpful in determining if a candidate is an appropriate cultural fit, it's important to remain cognizant of employment laws when conducting reference checks. In order to steer clear of legal trouble, don't ask questions about:

- **Personal information:** Avoid asking questions that may reveal an applicant's age, religious beliefs, nationality, race, religion, or familial status to protect your company from potential claims of discrimination.
- **Health information:** Prospective employees have a right to privacy and information related to health is protected by federal law. While you can ask if a candidate is capable of performing certain tasks, steer clear of asking about disabilities or health issues.
- **Financial information:** Although you may be able to make a hiring decision contingent on a satisfactory credit score, it is inappropriate to ask about finances or credit history during a reference check. If credit history is relevant to the position, make that determination through an objective source of information such as a credit report.

Learn when to conduct an [employment background check](#) before making a job offer.