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THE TRUTH ABOUT JOB REFERENCES

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When applying for a job, it's not just your resume and interview that matter. Who you select to be your reference can make a huge difference. For me, picking the right reference has always been a challenge. There was a time, years ago, when I was applying for a job with a company that also employed a friend of the family. Before I submitted my application, I asked the friend if they would be willing to put in a good word for me. Because of our family connection, I didn't think that my request was inappropriate. She said that she would be happy to help. Thinking that everything would be fine, I went ahead and applied for the job. During the interview, I gave her name as a reference. I was offered the job on the spot and went home feeling victorious. Unfortunately, my victory was short-lived. A few hours later, I received a phone call from the hiring manager saying that he checked with my reference and because of that, he was forced to take back the job offer. At first, I thought he had to be kidding, but soon I realized that my friend wasn't as happy to help as she had claimed and in fact, didn't like me at all. It was an eye-opening experience to say the least, and one that can be prevented by making sure that your references are rock solid.

So, how can you make sure that the references you provide a new employer are going to be effective? Well, here are a few truths about job references that can make the task a little easier:

While your previous employers have some restrictions about what they are able to say, they can and will give you a bad reference if warranted - Many Human Resource offices have policies in place that prevent them from giving bad references, however, these rules can be bent. Not only that, there are still ways to get the point across without violating any rules. For example, simply saying "Please check this person's references very carefully" or "Let me pull the legal file to be sure what I'm allowed to say" is enough to make a prospective employer think twice.

Only provide references when specifically asked - You should treat your references like gold. Don't give away their contact information without good reason. Most of us send out copies of our resumes to companies we never hear from again, so there is no need to hand over this sensitive information. Instead, wait until the interview to provide them, that way, you'll have more control over who contacts them and why.

Stay in touch with your references - If you've had a professor, a mentor or a boss who worked closely with you, keep in touch with them. This doesn't mean that you have to talk to them every day, but you should stay in contact and update them with information about your career and accomplishments. After all, you want them to have all of the relevant info about what you're doing now, rather than only being able to speak about the past. In addition, staying in contact helps build the friendship, making it more likely that they will have positive things to say about you.

Always ask before using someone as a reference - This one is huge. Don't assume that someone will give you a good reference. In fact, it's not enough to simply ask them in casual conversation, you have to take things a step farther and ask what sort of reference they would give you. In my case, even though I asked, I made the mistake of asking while we were

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in the company of other family members. Without realizing it, I put her on the spot and she agreed only because saying no would have been rude. Instead, I should have pulled her aside and mentioned why I was looking for the job and talked about my qualifications. Then, I should have asked her if there was anything she could do to help me get the job and if I could use her for a reference.

When in doubt, do a test run - This may sound silly, but if you aren't sure what your references will say about you, why not do a test run? This is exactly what it sounds like. Enlist a friend's help, pretend to be a prospective employer and ask for a reference. It might seem sneaky, but it will give you a better idea of what an employer will learn about you.

Keep in mind that just because you get the job, it doesn't mean that you're done. Employers can, and often do, use the 90-day probation period to conduct more intensive background checks. During that time, if your work abilities or your references don't make you stand out, your new boss can fire you without having to give an explanation.