

Handling References: A Basic Guide

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Reputable law firms WILL want to hear from your past employers. Our recruiters discuss how to avoid getting burned in what is often the last step of the hiring process.

You just had a good interview. In fact, it was great! You really connected with the people that you met with; you found the practice to be interesting and sophisticated, the setting collegial and the compensation package first-class. You are one step closer to getting the job of your dreams when you are asked to provide your references. How should you handle this very important step in your job search? The following is a basic guideline aiming to steer you through this sometime tricky and often overlooked aspect of the job search process.

Usually after a successful interview, you will be asked to provide references. The key to handling this step successfully is to be prepared. One thing you should keep in mind is not to volunteer your references until asked. Therefore, you should not include references on your resume or cover letter unless specifically required by your prospective employer. What exactly are references used for? Reference checks are primarily made to:

- Assure that you told the truth about yourself.
- Get a feeling for how you work with others.
- Pick up otherwise undisclosed information, either positive or negative.

Today, many law firms and companies are very careful about sharing information regarding their former attorneys to avoid potential lawsuits. Often, a law firm will have a policy regarding references that only allow them to provide a job title and dates of employment.

One of the key aspects of references is

selecting appropriate references. Ideally, you should choose people who know you in a work setting - former employers, partners, judges, clients and peers. They are your best references. You should also consider well-known political, community or business leaders, educators or members of your professional associations. Unless you have already informed your current firm about your intent to leave, do not use current clients, partners or peers as references, as they may jeopardize the confidentiality of your job search.

Typically, you will be asked for three references. However, you will need to have several more references just in case. You should prepare a reference list to give a prospective employer using the following format:

- Your name at the top of the page
- Names of each reference
- Their phone number
- Their current titles
- Their address
- Their relationship to you
- Their current company

Prior to preparing your reference list, you should take steps to ensure that your references will in fact be helpful to you. Remember to:

1. Ask first.
 - Always ask a person to act as a reference before you provide his or her name to a prospective employer.
 - Meet or speak with the person to verify information for your reference sheet and ensure that you will get positive references.
2. Prepare your reference.

- Provide a copy of your resume to the person.
 - Develop a one-page summary about your career objective, practice, reasons for leaving, strengths, weaknesses, work style, and then review it with him or her.
3. Contact your references when you give his or her name to an employer.
 - Provide details about the prospective position and what you have to offer.
 - Share your excitement and enthusiasm.
 4. Ask for feedback after your reference has been contacted.
 - What types of questions were asked?
 - What topics were covered?
 - What concerns were raised?
 - Make sure to thank your reference.