

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the job market. It includes a list of the top 100 employers in the U.S. and a list of the top 100 jobs in the U.S. It also includes a list of the top 100 cities in the U.S. and a list of the top 100 states in the U.S. It is written in a style that is easy to read and understand. It is a must-read for anyone who is looking for a job.

# Managing Your References

*Just when you believe you have the position in the bag, weak and uninformed references can hurt your candidacy*

By PETER J. LEETS

When Vaughn Peters was laid off from his executive job with a \$250 million New York City publishing company, he knew he'd need professional references to land his next position. While many people put off reference selection until the last minute, Mr. Peters (not his real name) immediately telephoned the three people who best knew his work. He described his unemployment as having "decided to leave because I was no longer challenged."

Mr. Peters committed a mistake often repeated by job hunters: He didn't honestly present his situation. This put his references in the uncomfortable position of representing him based on a fabricated story. When contacting references, job hunters should always be truthful. They should offer a concise transition statement, followed by their objectives and how the references can help.

"Contacting potential references, or any [other contacts] prior to being completely prepared to positively represent your situation, minimizes your chances for success," says Bill Rioci, senior vice president of human resources for the Geneva Cos., an Irvine, Calif.-based mergers and acquisition advisory firm.

Some job hunters also misjudge their references and select people who are unable to present them effectively. Then, even if they emerge from the earlier stages of the selection process smelling like a rose, their candidacies can be unintentionally weakened.

References aren't to blame for undermining a candidacy. Rather, it's the job hunter's responsibility to manage the quality of his or her references. Other common mistakes in selecting and managing references usually pass unnoticed unless you know what to look for. Incorporate the following suggestions in your job search and your references will serve you well:

- **Evaluate all potential references.** Consider such acquaintances as prior managers, peers, subordinates, clients and professional colleagues. Depending on how effectively you've networked, handled your responsibilities and worked with others during your career, this list can easily include 15 to 20 people.
- **Select references who can sell your skills.** Although everyone on your list knows you, make sure those you select can vouch for you as someone who will contribute added value. They

should have the desire and verbal ability to sell your skills, personal qualities and professional attributes. It's not unusual for reference checkers to perform their task at their managers' request, and they may not be properly trained. Thus, they may feel intimidated about asking other questions besides dates of employment, last position held and eligibility for rehire. In such cases, good references will lead interviewers by making leading statements or discussing your strengths relative to the desired job.

- **Evaluate your most recent manager as a reference.** Most employers prefer to check your credentials with a current or previous manager. Unless you were told you absolutely couldn't use her, start nurturing the relationship now. More likely than not, she'll prove to be an excellent

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reference. Otherwise, defuse potential obstacles by focusing on the immediate concern rather than past differences. In difficult situations, it may be possible to draft a letter that's mutually acceptable and truthfully conveys your talents and accomplishments.

- **Identify and select listeners.** During conversations with potential employers, your references should listen for the real issues behind the questions and relay them to you. Once aware of any remaining issues, you can prepare appropriately for the next interview.
- **Personally renew the relationship.** Whenever possible, meet with your prospective references—perhaps for breakfast or lunch—to get reacquainted. Express an interest in their lives and avoid talking only about yourself. Be a likable friend they want to help and make them a part of your network.
- **Send necessary information.** Send thank-you letters to those who have agreed to serve as references. With each letter, send your resume,

transition statement and list of others serving as references.

- **Validate your references.** One way to determine whether marginal references can sell you effectively is to have a friend, ideally a personnel or search professional, call them about a hypothetical position you're pursuing through your friend's firm. They must maintain a professional demeanor, stating name, company and the position they're reference-checking. They should ask a few open-ended questions, such as: "What can you tell me about Mr. Peters?" "What are his strengths and weaknesses?" "What else should I know about him?" If your references, though well-intentioned, prove to be inadequate, you can help them to be more effective in subsequent conversations. Otherwise, replace them.

- **Prepare a list of references for each interview.** On stationery matching your resume, write names, addresses and telephone numbers (either work, home or both depending on the reference's choice), followed by a sentence describing your relationship. This is clearly more professional than having the interviewer wait while you look up numbers and jot them on a piece of paper.

Supply references' names only when reference checking is the last major condition of a job offer. "You have a responsibility to your references to be selective [about] who receives their name," says Kenneth Thompson, a partner with McCormack & Farrow, an executive search firm in Costa Mesa, Calif. "Too many calls, or unprofessional questions, sours your relationship with them and their willingness to help."

- **Alert your references before they're contacted by prospective employers.** Make sure they understand how your skills match the employer's needs, and why the fit is in your best interest. "It will help them sell you and make their jobs easier—a plus when considering busy schedules," says Tom Hobbs, vice president of human resources for Avco Financial Services in Irvine, Calif.
- **Follow up promptly.** Always call each reference with the outcome. Once you've accepted a new position, send your references an appropriate "thank you."
- **Maintain your references.** Odds are you'll change positions again, so stay in touch with references. Try using seasonal greetings, birthday cards, short notes, postcards or occasional get-togethers.

Whether you're employed or in transition, references can make or break your career. Follow these guidelines and your references will provide the "swing vote" that gets you the job you've earned. ●

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