

Using Phone References and Recommendation Letters

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Most people already know that they need a list of Professional References. But you might be asking, "Why do I need Letters of Recommendation at this point in my career?"

The answer is simple. You don't NEED them ... but you should WANT them. Why? Because when you find yourself in a competitive interviewing situation (and what interviewing situation is NOT competitive?), the letters of recommendation can really "give you an edge."

In other words, when two or more candidates are equally qualified, the one who provides strong letters of recommendation at the later stages of the interview process will get the offer! So why not have this "extra ammunition" in your arsenal?

The recommended number of "phone reference people" is between 4 and 6; and you should secure at least 3 or 4 solid Letters of Recommendation.

Here's how to get your "Phone Reference People" on board and generate your Letters of Recommendation.

1. Make a list of all the people you want to ask for help.
2. Separate them into two categories - one group to write Letters of Recommendation; the other to serve as phone references.
3. Call and ask them all for their help, stating exactly what you want them to do, and soliciting their participation.
4. Send them each a packet, including these four items: Cover Letter, Professional Biography, Resume and List of Targeted Companies. Your cover letter will include a bullet list of the specific attributes or experiences you want them to focus on in their letter or phone call. NOTE: the cover letter you send to the "letter writers" will be slightly different from the letter you send to the "phone reference people."
5. Follow-up to be sure they received everything and that they fully understand your documents.
6. Tell the "phone reference people" to inform you immediately when they receive any calls from prospective employers. (This information will be very valuable to you!)

7. Tell the "letter writers" that you want to review their "rough drafts" and "check them for accuracy." Later, instruct them to print-out the final letters on company letterhead (after you have edited the text, as needed).

8. Offer to help each of these participants in a similar capacity, should the need ever arise in their own careers.

Letters of Recommendation: Guidelines for the Writer

Provide these instructions to your "letter writers:"

- Print the final letter on your company letterhead. If your employer does not permit you to write such letters on company letterhead, then please use your personal letterhead. NOTE: you could create a simple letterhead for them (name, address, phone, e-mail at top of the sheet).
- Do not date the letter, and do not include any salutation (there should be no "Dear _"). Also, do not write, "To Whom it May Concern," or "Dear Sir/Madam."
- Keep the letter fairly brief, and never more than one page.

Also give the following instructions to the people who will be writing your letters of recommendation (adapted to your own name/situation/ background):

1. The first paragraph should say something like:

"I am writing to you on behalf of my former colleague, Sally M. Smith. I had the privilege of working with her from 19XX to 20XX when she was the (title) of (company XYZ)." Use your own words.

2. In the 2nd paragraph, mention some specifics that you recall about me:

"As the (title/company), Sally directed the strategic planning process for our division and led the economic and market forecasting. Her forecasts were instrumental in a number of projects. She actively contributed to the composites industry by doing (A, B and C). Sally consistently demonstrated (words such as leadership, problem-solving, communication, follow-through, analysis, organization are good to use). Throughout her tenure with company XYZ, she proved herself to be _ and a _ team player." (Or something along these lines. Focus your attention on my contributions to the company as much as possible). Again, use your own words.

3. For paragraph 3, you may wish to mention some personal traits/values of mine:

What was it like to work with me, how did I measure-up as a team member compared with others? What contributions was I known for? What was I particularly good at? What positive recollections of working with me do you have? Use whatever adjectives come to mind.

4. The last paragraph should reiterate how you feel about me as a professional:

"I feel strongly that Sally would bring A, B and C to any organization and prove to be a valuable, contributing member," (or something similar). End with a sentence that says something like, "I would be happy to talk with you if you have any questions about Sally," or "Please feel free to contact me directly if you would like to know more about Sally's work." Use your own words.

Telephone References: Whom to Ask and How to Ask

When you create your list of Professional References, be sure to include the following elements for each individual:

- Name
- Title
- Company
- Street Address
- Phone Number
- E-Mail Address
- The person's relationship to you (Example: As the Senior Scientist in charge of all research projects, Terry can attest to my technical and analytical skills.)

Also, always use the prefixes Mr., Ms., or Dr. before each name on your list of Professional References.

Conclusion

You'll need to go through the necessary steps to get these tools together - and it may take some time. But as a result, your "Job Search Portfolio" will be much stronger. When used properly, your Telephone References and Letters of Recommendation will distinguish you from the other candidates, and ensure that

you'll get more offers!

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