

Are You Making the Most of Your References?

by John West Hadley

You do have references, don't you? People you have worked with in the past who can testify to the outstanding results you are capable of producing? But what steps are you taking to ensure that you are getting the most from having those references?

First off, if you aren't currently interested in pursuing new opportunities, **have you allowed your references to become 'back burner' contacts, people you only reach out to once in a blue moon?** Or have you not even given much thought to who might be in a good position to serve as a powerful reference?

Contacts who you feel could serve as strong references are perhaps your most critical resource in career growth! These are people who feel strongly about the quality of your work and who feel comfortable advocating on your behalf. These are powerful networking contacts who (if you've properly prepped them) have a good idea what opportunities might interest you, and can be your eyes and ears in the market.

References can even become your personal 'board of directors'. They serve as a sounding board for issues you face in your career and new directions you might like to pursue. They give honest feedback on how you can best achieve the next level in your career and provide valuable networking contacts to assist in furthering your goals.

If you have let your reference list grow stale, sit down right now and think about four to six people who could testify to your performance, skills and qualities. Separate them into categories, such as:

- Former bosses
- Executives who had occasion to witness your work in other capacities
- Peers, co-workers and collaborators on particular projects
- Former subordinates
- Fellow board members or participants on volunteer efforts
- Personal references

Now make a point of setting up a meeting with each of them (ideally in person), where you can refresh the connection and bring them up to speed on what you are doing, your goals and the value you would add to the role you would really love to have.

For those of you already in or seriously contemplating a career search, think about these five questions:

1. Do your references have the most current copy of your resume?

How can you expect them to speak as effectively on your behalf as they possibly could, if they don't even have your current 'sales brochure'? If someone asks me a question about your background, you don't want me fumbling and saying, "I'm not really sure what his title was", or "I didn't know she worked there", or "I don't know if his background includes that."

2. Have you prepped your references with exactly what type of position you are most interested in, and why you believe you would be an outstanding candidate for that role? Or are you just assuming that they will naturally support you for it?

You need to have an 'interview' with each of your references, where you sell them on what you are seeking, why you are a great candidate, and what sorts of results you could achieve for your target employer. This ensures that they are equipped to sell you to others as effectively as possible, and helps maintain them as powerful networking contacts who can provide you leads directly.

Prepping them this way gives you a chance to sound them out on the level of support they will give you. If THEY don't believe you would be an outstanding candidate, then how will they sell you effectively in a reference check?

In fact, one thing that a high-quality recruiter will often do for strong candidates is their own



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reference check. Wouldn't it be valuable to know how your reference actually presents you to a third party?

3. Do you keep your references fully informed of every interview or other meeting you go on that might result in a call to one of them? Or do you just give out their names and assume everything will go as expected?

After you give out your reference list, contact each reference individually and explain exactly what the position is, why you are excited about it, what issues you think the company / department / hiring manager is facing that you are well-equipped to solve, and what areas of concern they might have about your candidacy. You want them to know how they can best help you in any follow-up conversation and what areas it might be helpful for them to address. One of them may even happen to have a contact at the company to whom they might be willing to reach out on your behalf.

This can also be a chance to brainstorm any issues you have about the company, job and how you could best influence them to hire you over other candidates.

4. Do you have references capable of speaking knowledgeably to different aspects of your background and your capabilities? Or are all of them from the same company or the same job levels?

If all of your references know you from one company or in one context, that by itself may raise red flags for hiring managers. They may immediately wonder why you didn't include anyone from other areas—was there a problem? And now they may probe those other areas even more thoroughly and perhaps discount some of the glowing remarks of your references. Or at least they are less inclined to reach out to multiple references, since they will all be testifying to the same area and experiences.

In my last corporate search, I had a list that included:

- A senior executive for whom I had worked directly.
- A peer who could testify to my actuarial and financial work.
- A peer who ran an unrelated area, and with whom I'd partnered on many issues outside of my traditional responsibilities.
- A developer with whom I'd worked on a variety of systems projects.
- A non-actuarial manager who had worked for me for a number of years.

5. Have you made your references strategic business partners in your search? Or are you simply using them as references to be called upon when needed?

You should have selected these people because of their ability to recommend you strongly and without reservations. (If not, you have some work to do on your list!) Contacts like that should be a core of your networking activities!

Rather than just use these contacts passively, sit down with them from time to time to update them on your search, get their advice and perspective and to provide you introductions to helpful contacts. They should be some of the first to know of any shift in your thinking about your career goals, what you have to offer in your target area, specific companies in which you are interested, etc. They should be fully prepared to recommend you in any casual conversations they have or suggest another person for you to add to your repertoire of networking contacts.

References are also great sounding boards. You can probe them for any weaknesses they perceive in your background or suitability to your 'dream job', and seek their advice on how to build your capabilities in those areas.

Follow these five steps to get a lot more 'bang for the buck' from your references! □

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