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For the June/July Byliner

References:

What You Must Know!

By Laurie Mitchell, Certified Personnel Consultant
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A diligent recruiter does a candidate's references twice: Once informally -- prior to submitting the candidate to a client company -- with a couple utterly confidential and trustworthy off-the-record sources who confirm the recruiter's assessment and instincts that her candidate has excellent qualifications and interpersonal skills for a specific search requirement; and again -- just prior to offer stage -- when the recruiter formally contacts all the professional references provided by the candidate and a few additional people who may or may not be the informal ones contacted earlier and who were *not* provided by the candidate.

Because written recommendations can easily be manufactured they are disregarded or verified with a live phone call. A seasoned recruiter pays attention to how quickly a reference returns her call and on the call, itself, she "hears between the lines": what isn't being said or how a positive comment is phrased or positioned; how a weakness is parsed; and whether specific questions are answered or avoided. Always attuned to canned or "pre-arranged answers", she asks the unexpected or requests extra detail or color commentary.

The neutral response -- "I really don't have an opinion as I wasn't much exposed to his work" -- is the new negative in our litigious world. The truly negative reference "I'd rather not (or can't) discuss" sets off alarm bells unless the HR police will flog the squealer for disobeying corporate policy by giving a reference in the first place. But, the veteran recruiter knows how to overcome this objection in a nanosecond!

Often a candidate will receive a lousy reference. Surprises occur quite frequently, hidden resentments or agendas surface, candidates misjudge what others think of them. Recently, a reference provided by the candidate, himself, said "Joe always made mistakes, never got it right, but is a really nice guy whom we all liked a great deal".

Even if you think that the references you provide will all say good things, it might pay to test run them. Set up a plausible ruse and see what your references divulge. You may learn some painful truths, but forewarned is forearmed, and you'll be able to discuss the problem situation upfront with the recruiter or the prospective employer.

Five excellent references and one lousy one are usually more about the lousy one. Three and three cause me to call another three. The same weakness noted by five references is an important clue for how the candidate's new employer should manage him. Carefully consider whom you use as references. They can, and do, make or break careers more often than you might suspect.