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The Value of Maintaining Meaningful References

Wisely choosing and nurturing your spokespeople are crucial.

The countless hours you spent updating your resume, researching and networking to find your next opportunity, drafting cover letters and submitting your information to prospective employers have paid off; you are called for an interview. Intending to impress, you spend more time learning as much as you can about the organization, the role and your interviewers. Everything seemed to go well, but you did not get the job. Did you keep in mind that robust references are critical to closing the deal?

Imagine hearing these true-to-life responses from references provided by candidates who were not awarded the role:

- “Interesting that [he/she] listed me as a reference; I haven’t been in touch with this person for 10 years.”
- “It would have been nice if [the candidate] had called to tell me about this.”

Consider these guidelines:

- A resume can provide an invitation to interview.
- An interview can provide the opportunity for a job offer.

- One reference can make (or break) a career.

While you have invested time in getting as far as the interview phase, employers make a large investment in hiring you. References are like the reviews savvy shoppers read before deciding to make a big purchase. For these reasons, it is important to know how to cultivate references and nurture relationships. It is also a worthwhile effort to give considerable thought to the individuals you pinpoint to divulge information about your major accomplishments, experience, knowledge, strengths, weaknesses and circumstances or reasons for looking for another opportunity, and to solicit their opinions as to whether the potential role is a good fit.

Cultivating References

Before planting a garden, it is wise to first prepare the soil. As influential as references are, it is important to start the process of establishing a relationship with references early in your career and continue throughout it. When employers or search/recruitment firms conduct reference checks, they customarily use a 360-degree approach. That is, they generally talk to subordinates, peers, supervisors and other audiences. Board members, physicians, consultants, etc., fall into this “other” category.

On that note, also consider the reference value of people involved in any *internal* 360-degree evaluations you may have participated in. The same group that contributed to your appraisals knows whether recommendations were taken to heart and if a development plan was successfully implemented.

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For credibility, do not lose sight of successful stars in your constellation of references, placing emphasis on supervisors. In addition, categorically diversify with administrative types as well as physicians and other clinicians. As you progress professionally, keep these audiences, stars and categories in mind as they will help you decide which relationships to better nurture.

Nurturing Relationships

Keep cultivating your garden. Relationships wither without proper, ongoing communication and a genuine interest in or concern for the other party. A round or two of personalization also goes a long way. You

do not have to be a pest, but follow up at least yearly with potential references by employing any of these tactics:

- Greetings: Holidays and birthdays are opportune times to send warm messages.
- Publications: Do not lose track of potential references who are authors. Most people take it as a compliment if others read their published work(s) and comment or ask questions about the content. In addition, share articles you believe your contact(s) will find worthwhile.
- Promotion notices: While it is a good idea to alert appropriate

parties of your promotion or new role, responsibilities and updated contact information, this type of news also provides the opportunity to call or send a personalized message to notify references. Conversely, if you discover the same about a reference, be sure to congratulate him/her.

- Touching base: This type of call entails asking your contact how he/she is doing. If you have not already, establish a LinkedIn profile and invite your potential reference to become part of your network. This tactic can complement any of the above ideas.

Wisely Choosing Spokespeople

When going to market, farmers



showcase their best crop. Quality weighs more than quantity, and the same logic reigns when presenting references. Choose your spokespeople carefully, and consider the prospective role, organization, audience(s) and reference quality when developing your list.

For example, if you are being considered for a role that is heavy on a particular skillset (e.g., leadership, fundraising, community-image building or financial turnaround) include references who can specifically speak to your experience in these areas.

It is not uncommon in the healthcare field for organizations to employ executives from similar arenas. Thus, if you are applying for a role at a hospital, physician practice, health system and so on, include references who work in hospitals, physician practices or health systems, respectively.

Keep your audience top-of-mind when listing references. (That is, CEOs like to speak with other CEOs, and physicians like to speak with other physicians.) The same rings true for CFOs, board members and many others. Most often the hiring manager, prospective supervisor and/or recruitment consultant makes these calls, so be sure to think *apples to apples*.

It is good practice to keep potential references' contact information confidential. It is also advised to call them in advance regarding a *specific* job opportunity to:

- Alert them of your interest in the role and organization (forwarding

the job description makes for easier discussion)

- Share circumstances of *why* you are looking to make a change
- Reminisce about your working together and accomplishments
- Ask whether they are comfortable being contacted by your prospective employer, and establish whether they are free to comment fully or are constrained by their employers' confidentiality policies
- Determine their preferred method of being reached
- Remind them about confidentiality
- Listen carefully to their level of enthusiasm

During your conversation, if there is any hesitation and vagueness (no specific answers to your questions or a memory lapse), choose another reference. A neutral seed can cause severe damage. Keep the focus on quality, not quantity.

Never send a reference list with your resume or CV. Instead, consider adding "references are available upon request" to the end of your resume or CV. When you know you are a viable candidate, you can then finalize which spokespeople to present.

For executive-level positions, references will be called by the hiring party or the search firm or both. Resist any temptation to include previously written reference letters, as they are known more for what they

do not say and are not tailored to the specific opportunity.

A successful career can be achieved by having credible references who knowledgeably (and openly) speak for you. For this reason, they should be expertly cultivated, nurtured, chosen

carefully and highly valued. By understanding their power you can use references in a way that can make opportunities really grow. ▲

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