



Excellent References Can Be the Clincher

By: Linda Matias



"Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." This childhood chant is familiar to many. It is probably the most famous comeback line in playgrounds across the country. But does this jingle have merit outside of the playground? In the real world, does it matter what others think of you?

You bet it does. In fact, it matters so much that potential employers seek out the opinion of others as part of the selection process. An excellent reference confirms to an employer that his or her assumption about your ability to do the job is accurate; a negative reference will have the employer running for the exit.

Since references can be the decisive factor on whether you are offered a position, it is important to choose referents carefully. The traits of good references are straightforward – they must be credible and provide a fair and balanced representation of your qualifications. Though the criteria is not complicated, choosing someone who can help you can be difficult.

Not only should referents be willing and able to speak enthusiastically on your behalf, they must also have intimate knowledge of your experience and accomplishments. It is not enough to compile a list of your fan base; references must backup their opinions with hardcore facts. This is why it is important that you not pick your references out of a hat, but strategically choose them based on their power of influence.

Solid references fall under several categories:

Managers who can provide specifics on your knowledge, skills, and abilities and how your expertise influenced the advancement of the department.

Colleagues who can provide details on successful projects that you were part of and how your efforts directly impacted the outcome. Direct supports that can provide details on your ability to lead. Associates or vendors who can provide information on your professionalism and integrity when conducting business.



Once you have compiled a list of references, you must take the time to educate and prepare each one for his or her role in the process. You can easily coach them to provide convincing, realistic testimonials by providing a current resume and filling them in on your career objective. It is also to your advantage to clue them in about the requirement of the job for which you have applied.

During the course of the conversation, describe the position you are seeking, the type of organizations you are applying to, and provide a listing of related skills and accomplishments. In addition, jog their memories by describing the projects that you worked on together and remind them of the end result.

Having a "sit down" with each reference will allow you to get reacquainted and reduce the anxiety that the he or she may feel about saying the wrong things. It will also put your mind at ease because you will have supportive players who have your best interests at heart.

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Recognized as a career expert, Linda Matias brings a wealth of experience to the career services field. She has been sought out for her knowledge of the employment market, outplacement, job search strategies, interview preparation, and resume writing, quoted a number of times in The Wall Street Journal, New York Newsday, Newsweek, and HR-esource.com. She is president of CareerStrides and the National Resume Writers' Association.



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