

West Virginia University

Division of Human Resources

Employment Reference Guidelines

Reference checking is a fundamental part of the hiring process at WVU. Although reference checking can be time-consuming because references are often difficult to obtain, all hiring managers tasked with this assignment are expected to secure references on the prospective employee to be hired. **This also includes referencing a current or former WVU employee you are considering to hire.**

Why reference? The goal of verifying references is to confirm your selection of the final candidate before Human Resources makes a contingent employment offer. You are strongly encouraged to become familiar with WVU's practices on the reference check process. Because past performance is the best predictor of future performance, reference checking is mandatory as part of the hiring process at WVU.

Reference Check Form - To ensure consistency in the reference gathering process, use the attached Reference Check Form.

Work vs. Personal References - Personal references provided by co-workers, friends, relatives and neighbors will, in all likelihood, be positive and may not adequately address the applicant's work performance.

- Begin the reference process by thoroughly reviewing information obtained on the employment application and credentials submitted by the job applicant and identify the people you wish to reference. ***Obtain work-related references from the candidate's immediate supervisor whenever possible.***
- As a general rule, try to speak directly to the applicant's immediate supervisor when seeking employment references. If you believe the employer is hesitant to provide information over the telephone, offer to have them call you back so that the person providing the reference can verify who you say you are.
- Many employers will only provide dates of employment, job title and salary information. If this is company policy, be sure to date and document this information and proceed referencing other employers listed. Employers are not obligated to provide answers to all information requested. You should however, at a minimum, **confirm dates of employment and position held.**
- When obtaining information related to **Attendance/Dependability/Punctuality**, please communicate to the employer that you are not seeking information about an individual's legitimate use of sick leave or annual leave, which would include FMLA, STD, LTD and Worker's Compensation. You could phrase your question in the following manner. **Please tell me of any issues you have encountered with this person's attendance/dependability/punctuality if any, which does not relate to this individual's use of leave.**

- If you are unable to obtain reference information from a previous employer, document and date the outcome of your attempts to obtain this information. (*i.e., Unable to obtain reference information due to company policy, No records exist on the employee, Unable to be reached, etc.*)

Negative Information - If through the reference check process, a negative pattern or significant performance issue becomes apparent; this may be an indication of future performance problems if this candidate is hired.

- It is illegal for an employer to purposefully give false information for the sake of harming a former employee's reputation or preventing him/her from obtaining employment.
- Personal information that is not job related should neither be asked about nor provided by a prospective, present or former employer. If substantial discrepancies between the information you receive and what the applicant has stated appear to exist, please discuss with Employment Services.

Reference Methods - There are several ways to obtain references.

- Telephone is the preferred method of obtaining references at WVU because employers may be more willing to discuss performance on the telephone rather than committing comments to paper. In addition, telephone references can be obtained more quickly than written references.
- References on the final candidate must be obtained and submitted along with the candidate evaluation forms prior to an offer being extended by Employment Services.

Applicant Release - Some employers will ask if the applicant has given you permission to reference. If this occurs, you may fax or send a copy of the applicant's certification statement on their WVU Employment Application.

Prohibited Questions

- WVU does not illegally discriminate in the employment process. Therefore, you **must** avoid questions regarding race, color, religion, gender, age, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, veteran status, disability or marital status. Ask only job related questions. For consistency, use the reference check form provided by Human Resources.
- Beware of employers providing non-job related comments. Tell the employer that you wish to limit your discussion to job-related factors only.

Here are a few steps to consider when reviewing a candidate's work history.

- You should review the job history carefully. Make sure you have an accurate timeline of past employment dates and know what happened during any periods of unemployment. It is appropriate to question the candidate about any gaps in work history through probing questions.
- Require applicants to provide up-to-date or missing information (job titles, addresses and phone numbers) on employers you wish to contact. If significant time has passed from

when you received the applicant credentials to the actual interview and reference check, it is critical to confirm that all information on the resume and application is still current.

- On the reference check form, document the steps you took to reference the candidate whether or not you were successful in obtaining information on present or former employers.
- Written letters of reference cannot be substituted for obtaining first hand and current reference information.

Do not reveal any reference information obtained from a present or former employer to a job applicant. If the candidate inquires about the outcome of a reference check, simply state that *it is not the practice of WVU to share employment reference information with job applicants.* If the applicant persists, please refer the applicant to the Director of Employment Services.

Do not skip over reference checks to make a quick hiring decision or make an employment decision solely on the fact that the department may be providing a personal reference. Employment references should be completed for the past seven years.

The highest level of confidentiality must be maintained throughout the reference check process.

If you are obtaining a reference on a current employee, it is only necessary to contact their current supervisor.

Before saying and writing anything, remember that it may be used in a court of law against you and that any inaccurate information given can be argued to be defamatory.

If you are contacted to provide a reference check or employment verification by another organization outside of the University, please direct all calls to Payroll at 304-293-3379.

Questions regarding the reference check process should be directed to Employment Services at 304-293-5700.