How to Choose the Right References

by Rebecca Knight  |  11:00 AM October 21, 2014

You aced the last round of interviews and now your prospective employer wants to check your references. Who should you ask? Which people can best vouch for you? Will they be able to describe all your relevant qualities and skills and explain why you’re a fit for the new job?

What the Experts Say

One of the biggest mistakes jobseekers make is failing to understand “how incredibly important references are,” to the hiring process, says Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, a senior adviser at global executive search firm Egon Zehnder and the author of It's Not the How or the What but the Who: Succeed by Surrounding Yourself with the Best (http://hbr.org/product/its-not-the-how-or-the-what-but-the-who-succeed-by-surrounding-yourself-with-the-best/an/16921-HBK-ENG) . References provide “an accurate, third-party assessment of your strengths and weaknesses so managers can hire knowing full information,” he explains. “Given the option of either interviewing a candidate without checking references or checking references without interviewing, I would choose the latter.” As a job candidate, you must therefore be thoughtful and strategic about both whom you ask, and how you prepare them to speak on your behalf, according to Priscilla Claman, the president of Career Strategies, a Boston-based consulting firm and a contributor to the HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job (http://hbr.org/product/hbr-guide-to-getting-the-right-job/an/11737-PDF-ENG?referral=01410) . “You want your references to present a consistent story about who you are, what you are good at, and what it is you want to do” with your career, she says. Here are a few things you should consider.

Be prepared

Even before you start the job interview process, you should develop a mental list of past and current colleagues who could serve as references for you so that once you’re asked to provide them, you’re ready. Ideally, your list should include a mixture of former and current bosses, coworkers, and subordinates. “The best references are from people who have worked closely with you,” says Fernández-Aráoz. Never ask someone to be a reference if you don’t know for certain what he or she is going to say, adds Claman. “You should ask managers who have given you positive performance reviews. Ask coworkers who have thanked you for help on projects. And ask people who have successfully worked under you,” she says. “This is why you have to maintain those relationships.”

Understand your options

If the hiring manager asks to check your references at your current organization and you don’t want to divulge the fact that you’re considering leaving, you have two options. One, offer to provide references outside of your organization — consultants, advisors, lawyers, or clients — who can speak to the quality of your job performance. Or two, offer to provide references once the new company makes you a formal job offer. “It’s fairly common,” says Claman. “Most companies understand the position you’re being put in.” There are certain instances, however, where it is acceptable to
tip your hand, says Fernández-Aráoz. Perhaps you’re not going to progress to the next level; you’re not interested in a promotion; or you need to leave your job for personal reasons. If you’ve decided to leave, use your best judgment in selectively sharing that information with colleagues. “But if you are otherwise happy where you are, wait until you’re at an advanced stage” before revealing your plans, says Fernández-Aráoz.

**Get specific**
When the hiring manager requests your references, “find out what specifically he or she is looking to check,” says Fernández-Aráoz. If the manager wants to learn more about your leadership style, then he should speak to your former and current direct reports. If he wants to check your ability to develop a strategy, bosses are the people to call. If he wants to learn about your ability to influence, he ought to talk to peers. “This helps the person do a more relevant reference check and get a more credible, accurate assessment,” he says. Remember: the quality of the references you offer is a reflection on you.

**Offer context**
Help your references offer the best possible endorsement by providing them with information about the role you are being considered for and why you want the job. “Give them a framework,” says Claman. “Tell them why you believe the company wants to hire you and how you are likely to be useful for that company so they can reinforce that.” Gently remind your references of your past achievements and approach, “Coach them on what you want them to say,” she suggests. Also ask different references to highlight different talents and strengths, she says. “One could talk about your ability to establish relationships with colleagues, another about your technical skills, and another about your project management abilities.”

**Be resourceful**
If you are being considered for a job in which you don’t have direct experience, it can be tricky to come up with an appropriate reference. In hiring circumstances like these, you need to take a different approach. Recount a time in your past where you picked up new professional responsibilities, spearheaded a cross-functional project, or took on a new geography, then think about colleagues with whom you worked closely then. You want “individuals who have seen you do something different,” says Fernández-Aráoz. “When a hiring manager hears that you’ve [taken on something new] under similar circumstances, he will infer competence.”

**Find common ground**
The best testimonials depend on the “openness” of the person providing the reference, according to Fernández-Aráoz. To “facilitate candor,” he suggests you try to identify commonalities between the person checking your references and the people providing them. Perhaps the hiring manager and your former boss share an alma mater. Or maybe the she once worked at the same company as one of your close colleagues. “People will place more weight on those references because of the familiarity effect,” says Fernández-Aráoz. Similarly, the referee will likely “be more open and candid” during the conversation.

**Explain negativity**
“You should know when to expect a negative reference,” says Fernández-Aráoz. It might come from a manager who fired you, from someone who gave you a poor performance review, or from a colleague who felt offended that you left the organization. If the hiring manager asks to call that particular person, be honest. “Say: ‘This person will likely give you a negative reference. Let me tell you why.’” Then suggest other people in the same organization who “can offer relevant and objective” opinions, says Fernández-Aráoz. After all, the last thing you want is for the “hiring manager to be surprised by what he hears,” says Claman.

**Do**
- Have a ready list of references that includes a mixture of bosses, colleagues, and direct reports who will provide strong testimonials on your behalf
- Think creatively about others who might be a good reference; your list could also consist of consultants or customers who can speak about the quality of your performance
- Remind your references of your past achievements and ask them to highlight specific skills and strengths
Don’t

- Ask someone to be a reference unless you’re sure that person will say positive things about your work
- Rule out using references from your current organization; consider your circumstances and decide whether it makes sense to tip your hand that you’re leaving
- Be vague about your potential new opportunity; provide your references with information about the role you are being considered for and why you want the job

Case study #1: Be honest about your circumstances and provide relevant context

For five years, Michiko Gupta had a staff job she loved at a large Boston-based university. But earlier this year, her husband got a new job based in Chicago. “My first thought was: What’s going to happen to my career? My second thought was: I need to tell my manager I’m leaving.”

When Michiko broke the news, her manager was upset but understood that she needed to move for family reasons. “The conversation naturally turned to that fact that I was now looking for a new job,” Michiko recalls. “She volunteered to be my reference and then gave me some advice: it’s always best to look for a job while you still have one.”

Michiko’s boss allowed her to work remotely from Chicago for three months while she looked for a new position. Eventually, through another colleague in Boston, she learned of an opportunity at a school in her new city, and when her interviewers asked for references, she of course provided the name of her still-current manager. “We had such a close relationship that I just forwarded her the job description and gave her a heads up that someone would be reaching out to her,” Michiko says. “She knew my strengths.”

For a second reference, Michiko chose her manager’s counterpart in another department but, since she and the person hadn’t worked together as closely, she took a different approach. “I called her to talk about the job I applied for, and I told her which areas the hiring manager would be focused on. I also reminded her of my responsibilities on an assignment we did together and asked if she could talk about project management skills and my teamwork capabilities. I wanted her recommendation to complement the one from my manager.”

Michiko got the job. And while she misses her old boss and team, she is thriving in her new role.

Case study #2: Think deliberately and strategically about whom to ask

Scott Merritt — a public relations executive in Atlanta — had gone through several rounds of job interviews at a company when he was asked for references. He knew it was a critical decision: “In job interviews, I am confident that I know my stuff and I am up on the latest methods and trends, but I also know — having hired a number of people myself — that a lot comes down to who the hiring manager speaks to and what they learn,” he explains.

But, deeply unhappy at his current company, he wasn’t about to ask his boss to be a reference. Fortunately for him, “in the PR business, there are a lot different kinds of references you can use.”

Scott asked three people. The first was a former business partner he still spoke to at least once a week by phone and whom he considered a “professional sounding board.” The second was a client he currently worked for who had been complimentary. “I knew he would provide a very solid reference, and it wouldn’t be a problem that he knew I wanted to leave my job,” Scott explains. And his third reference was a journalist. “If I wanted to be taken seriously as a PR that has strong relationships with reporters and gets a lot of media placements, I knew I had to prove it. In the job I was up for, I would be working on a lot of technology accounts, so I asked a technology writer who works for a number of tier one newspapers and magazines. I knew that a recommendation from him would enhance my value proposition.”

All three references delivered. Scott got the job and, 18 months into his new gig, he is much happier at his new company.

More on job hunting:

How to Write a Cover Letter (http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/02/how-to-write-a-cover-letter/)

How to Keep a Job Search Discreet (http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/03/how-to-keep-a-job-search-discr/)
Reference-Check Your Future Boss (http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/05/reference-check-your-future-boss/)