

# The Truth About Reference and Background Checking

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“Background checks” often involve verification of educational degrees, certifications, as well as employment, criminal and driving-record searches. In some situations, they may involve psychological tests, fingerprinting and credit checks. In addition, “background checks” can include checking publicly available information using Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, IRS 990s or other online information.

## Mind the Gap!

Reference and background checks verify information about a candidate. Reference calls assist in enhancing an employer’s understanding of a candidate’s experience, skills and work style. Background checks verify—or not—that the information provided by the candidate is accurate and if there is important undisclosed information. If potential employers have gaps in their knowledge about candidates, such as why they left a previous position, they should ask the candidates directly before calling references.

## Everything Above Board

Are employers tempted to conduct a background check without a candidate’s knowledge in order to get the “real scoop”? A good background check does not commence until the candidate has signed a written authorization. Conducting background checks without the candidate’s permission is not only an invitation to a lawsuit, but also likely to give inaccurate results. Background checks may require such information as date of birth, college graduation or

If you are looking for a new position, you undoubtedly have carefully prepared your resume and have contacted people to serve as references. However, do you really understand all the nuances of reference and background checking? Nonprofits should adopt best practices, not only to comply with labor and privacy laws, but also to ensure that their procedures are effective and productive. At the same time, jobseekers need to understand what such checks can mean for future employment.

## Reference and Background Checks Are the Same—Not!

While the terms reference and background checks are sometimes used interchangeably, many employers and search firms use the term “reference checks” to describe conversations about a candidate with individuals who know that candidate.

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other names used. At the same time, unauthorized references are more likely to reveal negative information. However, they may involve breach of candidate confidentiality, mistaken identity, personal grievances and hearsay. If an employer has someone whom he or she trusts and wants to talk with that person about a candidate, the candidate should sign a written authorization to allow the employer to do so.

### Where's the Current Supervisor?

It is appropriate for employers to contact only references that are provided by a candidate. Candidates should be prepared to provide five to eight references that include supervisors, board members, volunteers, peers and staff reports. While it can be helpful to include the current supervisor, this is frequently unrealistic given the confidentiality of the job search. However, it can be revealing if the candidate does not provide any previous supervisors or is unwilling to provide references from

an organization with which they have had a short tenure or abrupt departure. References should not include relatives, and they should be able to speak to the business experience of the candidate. If the list of references a candidate supplies is inadequate, an employer can ask for additional names that meet specific requirements.

Calls are most useful when the candidate has informed the references of the organization and for which position he or she is a candidate.

### Who Calls References?

It is most effective to limit the number of people making the reference calls, to ask the same questions and to record responses in a uniform way. The candidate's future supervisor should make at least one reference call in order to gain some insights into the candidate's style. Because most reference calls will involve callbacks, the person making the calls should be someone who is frequently available to accept phone calls.

### Questions, Questions, Questions

Employers are unlikely to have a lot of time with any reference they call. Most people who are listed as references will be difficult to reach and may call back at an inopportune time or place. If you are hiring, you should be able to ask your questions from memory. You need concise, clear questions that will provide insights into how the individual has performed in the past and how he or she will fit your position's needs.

Employers most likely have reference questions similar to the following:

- How could this person improve his or her performance?
- How is the organization different and better for the candidate's having worked there?
- What will the organization learn about the candidate in nine or 10 months that it might have wanted to know before hiring the candidate?
- Would the organization hire this person again?

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- Why did this person leave his or her previous job?

### Comparing Candidates by References?

If a background check leads an employer to conclude that a candidate has been dishonest, it is usually wise to remove the candidate from consideration. Serious misrepresentations in applications do occur, and because of this, organizations should take the time required to verify information related to job tenure and education. If there is urgency in making an offer, it can be made subject to a clear background check.

Reference calls are less definitive than background checks. Some organizations do not permit staff to provide information on previous employees beyond verifying dates of employment and position titles. Even if there is not a specific policy limiting what references can discuss, there may not be much information obtained in a call.

References will sometimes be more frank if they know that their responses will be confidential and presented without direct attribution. Even then, references are usually more helpful in providing context for how an employee would work in a new position than in providing information that will rule a finalist in or out.

### How Often, and When?

Given the need for confidentiality for candidates, the time that this process takes, and the fact that references can better confirm a candidate's suitability than provide extensive insights, most employers will conduct full reference and background checks on only one or

two finalists. On the other hand, checks on the Internet about publicly available information on a candidate are worth doing early.

### Now, About Those Credentials and Degrees ...

Background checks take some time. Most universities have procedures to verify that the candidate has given permission to check his or her credentials. Many use the Student Clearinghouse website ([www.studentclearinghouse.org](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org)) to verify degrees. This requires employers to have a procedure to obtain a candidate's permission along with a date of birth. The procedure must ensure that this cannot result in age discrimination. Criminal background checks are usually done by a third party and are subject to the requirements of Fair Credit Reporting laws.

### One Strike Doesn't Mean "You're Out!"

By the time most individuals have reached senior positions, they will have dealt with hundreds of volunteers, board members and other staff. There may be individuals who do not like difficult decisions that they made, but this does not necessarily mean that this candidate will not be a good fit for another position. With any negative comment from a reference, especially those not provided by the candidate (for example, input from "a colleague of a colleague"), employers should consider the source, context and situation.

### Spent Time Behind Bars?

Criminal background checks have limitations. Despite what some say, there

is no complete national criminal database that can be used to check records. Criminal background checkers use a variety of techniques to find records, but the techniques are far from perfect. Records usually go back only seven years, and many items may not appear in publicly available records. Even the most reliable background checking firm can fail to find a record of something that occurred in an unexpected location. The claim that "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" is usually true.

### Avoiding the Elimination Round

Employers should evaluate the information they receive in making a decision. They need to ask the candidate to explain a particular situation. Criminal and Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) checks may provide information on anything ranging from speeding tickets to major felonies. Some of these situations might eliminate a candidate from any further consideration for a position. Others may not.

An educational or certification verification may appear to show that candidates have not graduated when they said that they did. Sometimes those records may be inaccurate because of name changes or technical glitches. Before assuming that a candidate has been dishonest, ask for an explanation.

### All Organizations Are Not Equal

A reference check should focus on a candidate's fit with a particular job in a particular organization. The requirements of the position and an organization's culture are likely to be different from that of a previous employer's. Many organizations of all sizes fail to perform proper background checks, and even if a background check was performed by a previous employer, it is unlikely to be up-to-date. Both employers and candidates alike need to be prepared for reference and background checks. ☞

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## Resources

### AFP Job Center

Whether you are looking for a job related to major gifts, marketing or planned giving, AFP's Job Center has opportunities for you. The posted jobs are dedicated exclusively to development professionals, and you can receive automatic notification of new jobs matching your criteria. To find your next rewarding career opportunity, browse the job postings—free of charge—on the AFP website at [www.afpnet.org](http://www.afpnet.org).