

Hiring Managers Really Do Check References: My Tips



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press.

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @WorkplaceGuru, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear Stephen:

I need help with references. I have worked for several dealers in the furniture industry, and they all seem so happy to have people who want to work for them they never even ask for references during the hiring process. I am over in the dealer world, though, so I have been applying to manufacturers. I have gotten to the final interview stage a couple of times now, and they always ask for four professional references, usually two former supervisors and two clients. The clients are easy to get.

So long as you take care of them, they are all too happy to help you. They get a dinner or ticket to an industry event, and you get a reference. My problem is the former supervisors. I know some of my former companies will only disclose dates of employment because they are so scared of the legal exposure of giving a bad reference. I obviously don't want a reference like that. My one previous supervisor from a company I know allows its employees to give full references has totally fallen off the map.

I've tried to contact her three times in the last year and haven't heard a peep. My last option is my current supervisor, who I like and with whom I have a good relationship, but no one at my company knows I'm looking, and I'm nervous about the repercussions of them finding out. How important is all this really? Do they really call them? And how do I explain I do not have a supervisor they can contact without it tanking my application?

Tell Them Something Good

Dear Tell Them Something Good,

Well, you could tell the truth and say you are a total screw-up who cannot get a reference from a supervisor. I wouldn't recommend it, though. You are right that everyone within 10 miles of a city can get a decent client reference. The catch is hiring managers all know that, so they do not mean that much. If you think they don't know you got that client a free ticket to the Hall of Fame dinner, you are kidding yourself. These hiring managers know who shows up to these dinners, and, believe me, they aren't dumb enough to think designers and architects bought their own tickets. Any halfway decent salesperson should be able to get glowing references from clients. Of course, any halfway decent salesperson should be able to find a couple of supervisors to speak well of them, too.

Giving you every benefit of the doubt I can possibly extend, I still cannot find any credibility in your story about your supervisors. I get that some companies have reference policies where they just confirm your employment dates, but if you cannot find two people to vouch for your candidacy, you do not deserve to get the job.

Perhaps your only valid question is about what to do if you are worried listing your current employer as a reference will

tip them off you are looking for another job. Generally, I have found supervisors — especially if you have a decent relationship with them, as you claim to — are open and understanding about people leaving. If you really think it will cost you your job or you are thinking of jumping to a competitor, then hiring managers will usually respect your hesitance to list your current employer as a reference. In this case, however, it is even more essential to have excellent and corroborating references from previous supervisors. Why would anyone believe you are a good employee, if they cannot talk to anyone who has ever employed you?

And yes, of course, these companies check with the references. If your references are not contacted before or shortly after you get an offer, you should be very curious, very suspicious and consider skipping the job altogether. With that said, checking references the right way is time consuming, so a good company will only ask for references late in the hiring process, and sometimes — though not often — a company will check only once all the paperwork is signed. My point is simply be aware and circumspect, and check in with the company about whether and when they will be contacting your references.

For those of you with more salient reference related anxiety, I find the best general advice

is to remember the references should fit into your application. Your whole application should formulate an argument about why you are the right person for a specific position. When choosing whom to use as references, consider which of your previous employers can offer the most to the argument that you're making to the hire manager and choose accordingly.

Choosing the right people is the hard part, so please, for the love of God, do not mess up the easy part. The easy part is checking in with your references and making sure they are willing to serve as a reference. But some people do not do this. This is important for two reasons. The first is it gives them an out if they cannot or do not want to say nice things about you. No one really wants to give bad recommendations, and usually they will make some excuse instead of going forward and saying mean things to the hiring manager. The second reason is common courtesy. If they get a call or email out of the blue, they'll be confused, maybe irritated and definitely won't be able to make the strongest possible case for you as a candidate. All it takes is a quick call or email. Just do it. Who knows? Maybe there is even a connection that you didn't know about and they otherwise wouldn't have made. It can only help.

Stephen