

THE KEY QUESTION

of Job References



Asking previous employers if they would rehire your candidate can yield a wealth of information. How to get honest answers—and how to read between the lines.

BY DEBORAH J. BEYER

YOU'VE REVIEWED EVERY RESUME, ELIMINATED UNLIKELY APPLICANTS, conducted job interviews, and narrowed the field of prospective employees to a well-qualified few. It's time to check references and make a final decision to fill the job vacancy on your office staff. A snap, right?

Two decades ago, that would have been the case. Even just one decade ago, contacting previous employers for candid evaluations of job candidates might have presented little problem, but lawsuits by disgruntled former employees who receive poor recommendations and changing employer-employee relations have made checking applicant references a tricky—and often unproductive—task. Now, previous employers are often reluctant to

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comment freely about former workers. Some strictly limit information to be given to simple verification of dates of employment, a practice set in writing by more and more office policies.

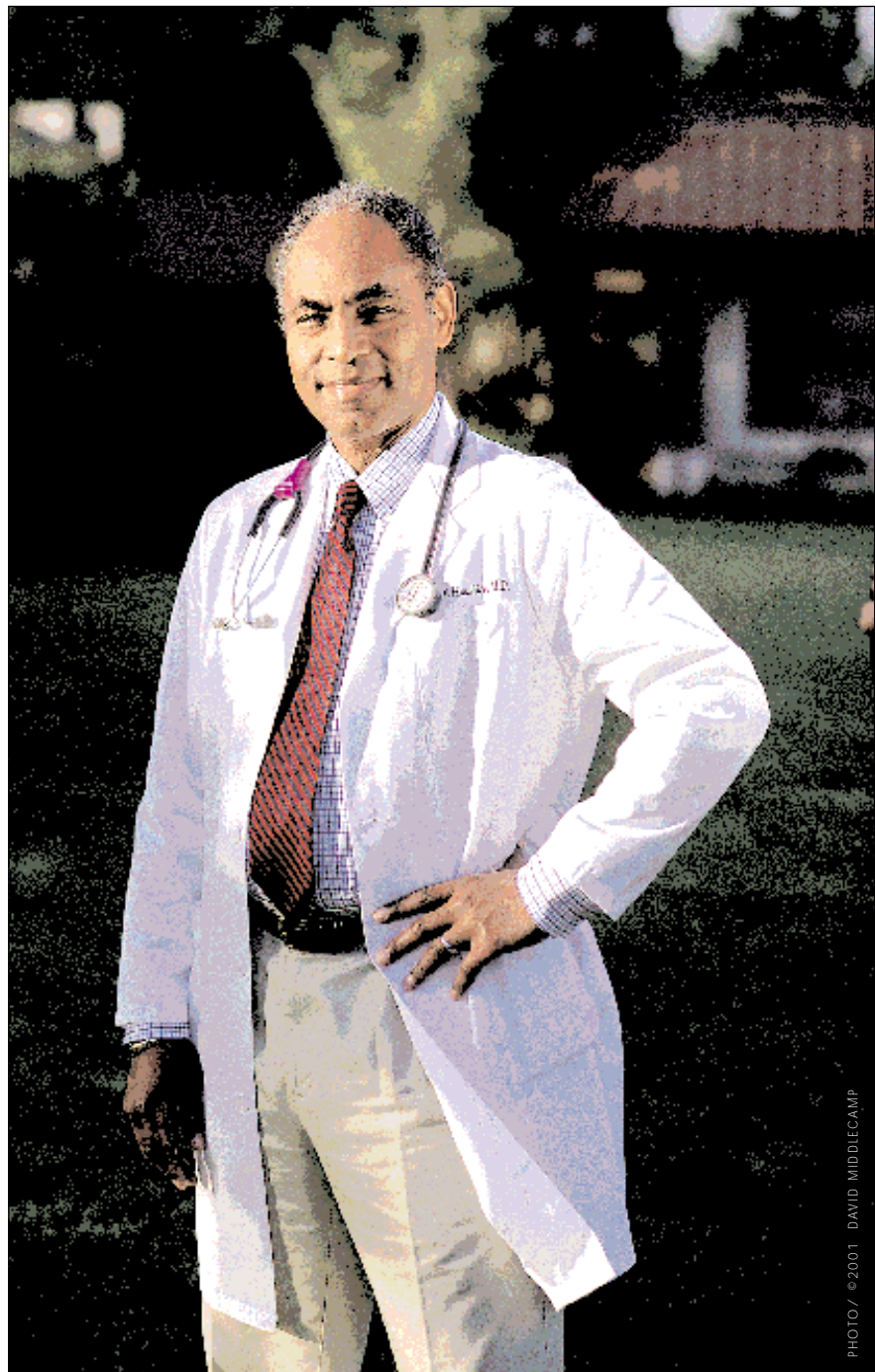
Ask the right question

Cheyenne Hoffmann-Conant, who hired staff members for Mattawan Medical Center in Mattawan, Michigan for 13 years, noted the gradually increasing difficulty in obtaining candid appraisals from former employers during the 1980s and ‘90s. During this time, she was responsible for checking references for the family medicine practice of her husband, Martin Hoffmann, MD.

“People became more fearful of litigation,” she says. “Although they want to be honest, they are interested in self-protection. Often they will couch their comments, say things in such a way that it is open to wide interpretation.”

So, without a direct phone line to a psychic friend, how is it possible to separate the stellar applicant from the tarnished one?

When collecting references, one important question may hold the key: Would you rehire this person? The answer may be direct or evasive. It may



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take a sharp ear, tactful probing, and some personal interpretation to uncover the truth and the reasons behind that truth. But the question is an all-important one when screening potential employees.

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ten. Absolutely, don’t hire that person.”

In preparation for the all-important reference check, review resumes of final applicants. Especially note gaps in employment history and be sure to ask each prior employer about the candidate’s previous and next jobs, if known. Few workers willingly leave gainful employment without securing other positions first. Some resign from positions in which their poor performance would surely result in dismissal

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in time. They figure, correctly, that resignation will “read” better than firing on a resume. A few employees enter their previous jobs unable to do the work. Others are hired in low-level positions and rise to the levels of their incompetence before leaving. Note each candidate’s first and last positions within each company. Rare employees tender resignations to avoid prosecution for embezzlement or material theft, drug usage, or most recently, sexual harassment charges. Although some women take leaves from their careers for child-rearing purposes, men who have gaps in their work histories and excuse them as stints as “Mr. Mom” are exceedingly rare. If you haven’t ascertained that work gaps are for acceptable reasons, the reference check is your last opportunity to do so. Exploring the “before” and “after” with each prior employer can help fill mysterious gaps, turn up any negative reasons for these, and save numerous headaches later.

The legal necessities

Although many medical practices do reference checks routinely without written permission, Ruth Lander, a practice administrator of Columbus Oncology in Columbus, Ohio, who has been hiring for medical practices for more than 13 years, notes that special care must be taken when checking references to avoid legal entanglements. Her practice uses a release signed by job candidates that permits the practice to contact both personal references and former employers. “With the release, we can go into more depth than we could otherwise. Of course, you need to have a rock-solid release,” Lander says. Asking applicants to sign such a release serves an additional purpose. The release, in itself, is a screening mechanism for applicants. “Job candidates who have past problems

Spotting the Troublesome Applicant

• IN THE RESUME:

Check for gaps in employment history. Each gap of more than a few months should be explored thoroughly during the interview to determine why an applicant left his or her previous job and what was done before work was resumed.

Look for length of service at each job. A candidate who lists a succession of brief jobs, even if continuous, is not ideal. You’re looking for longevity. An employee’s first few months on the job are most expensive for the

employer. During these initial months, the new employee will rarely earn his keep, and often the time and energy of a second employee will be diverted to the training of the new hire. Rapid job turnover also may be a sign of a chronically dissatisfied worker. As Cheyenne Hoffmann-Conant of Mattawan, Michigan, notes, “If a worker has left a succession of other practices after a brief period, I don’t care how ideal your practice situation might be, they’ll leave you, too.” ■

• IN THE INTERVIEW:

Strive for rapport and openness in your interviews. Although many questions are illegal to ask, comfortable candidates will often offer valuable information regarding child care or personal life that can help you evaluate applicants for fit. Be candid about yourself, your expectations, and your practice, too. If a few applicants decline to be considered further for your opening because of information you’ve given, all the better. You’ll save time knowing before you hire that someone objects to making coffee, won’t refrain from smoking, or wants to sell cosmetics across your front desk. Since you spend hours daily with your workers, you’re looking for the right employee, not just a warm body.

Beware of inflated expectations—especially in salary. “That’s probably our biggest problem,” says Dr. Jack Ricketts, an ob/gyn in St. Louis County, Missouri. “The

expectations in terms of salary are much too high.” If you hire a new worker, especially at a salary level below what he desires, the worker may never truly be satisfied. His low morale can infect the entire office staff.

Be wary of candidates who mention pending or prior litigation against former employers, neighbors, or business partners. People who are litigation-prone may make you their next target.

Involve a trusted staff member in your hiring process. That person can bring objectivity to the process. “A trusted office manager will look out for your interests in ways that you can’t,” advises Dr. Albert Hawkins, an internist in Santa Maria, California. “Your employees often look at the candidates more objectively and are good judges, not only of competence but whether the applicant will work well with the physician and with other employees.” ■

often choose to back off at this point,” she says.

If possible, make your reference check with each applicant’s previous supervisor, not a company personnel director. Those who worked directly with an applicant will provide more valid—and candid—

appraisals. Now make that call.

If you’re fortunate, you’ll contact a supervisor who will be honest and forthright about your applicant’s job performance. Dr. Jack Ricketts, an ob/gyn specialist in St. Louis County, Missouri, feels he still receives “pretty candid an-

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swers” from former employers. He admits that talking physician to physician, when possible, probably helps.

But it's still important to ask that key question: Would you rehire this employee? Listen carefully. You'll be noting tone of voice as much as the words that are spoken.

“Former employers will generally give you some hint at this point,” Lander says. “Often it's just the hesitation or silence at the other end of the telephone line that can be very telling.”

A prompt, positive response is the ideal answer. A long hesitation before a lukewarm, “Oh, I suppose so,” may indicate mediocre job performance or simply that the job candidate, ready to move on, had let his or her performance and enthusiasm slip. In either case, further exploration is in order. If you receive a negative response, ask whether it is company policy not to rehire previous workers. If not, heed the implied warning.

For candidates who have changed levels within companies, ask the rehire question for several levels of job responsibility: Would you rehire as a receptionist, as office manager, as financial manager? You'll spot the Peter Principle victim by the responses. Then reevaluate each applicant in terms of the responsibilities of your opening. An outstanding receptionist or file clerk may have failed miserably once bookkeeping was added to her duties. If your position has no financial elements, she may still be your ideal candidate.

Few previous supervisors of truly awful employees will want you to suffer as they have. Tone of voice, refusal to answer any direct questions, and responses couched in legalese may be hints to problem applicants. “I've been strictly instructed to refuse comment about this particular employee” or “our attorney

said to refer all inquiries regarding Jill Jones directly to him” shouldn't pass unheeded. Just as a reading of body language and voice tone is important when interviewing job applicants, reading the unspoken cues of references can guide you to the best new employees.

Still, push hard for candid answers. Occasionally, a reticent reference will break down out of sheer exasperation—and the true desire to help another employer. One reference persistently pursued finally admitted, “I'm not supposed to, but I just can't hang up without telling you. . . .” What followed was a tale of drug usage and criminal sexual activity that was truly frightening but never prosecuted because the employee resigned and moved from the area.

Eliminating evasive answers

Even an evasive reference may offer clues in closing statements. One reference I contacted refused all comment about an employee's performance, but she paused and inhaled long, audible breaths each time I posed a question. It was clear she was barely restraining her comments. Toward the end of the conversation, I repeated my key question “would you rehire?” Again, she refused to comment or to answer directly. I waited—another technique that encourages references to fill uncomfortable voids of silence by offering information. There was a long pause; then she said pointedly, “Oh, how I wish I could tell you more.” The applicant was suspected of embezzlement, but there did not appear to be enough concrete evidence to prosecute.

As you hang up with each reference check, summarize the conversation by posing the key question again, in less intimidating fashion. If you've detected problems with the applicant, say lightly, “So, do I assume correctly that you

wouldn't offer this person a position again?” Anxious to terminate an uncomfortable conversation, a reference may drop his guard at this point, relieved to be off the hot seat. “Not on your life!” one reference blurted to me at the end of a call, “but you didn't hear that from me.”

Obviously, how far and how hard to push a reference for information is something you'll need to determine with each individual encounter. Most reference checks are routine and pleasant; most applicants are exactly what they appear to be. That pleasant candidate with demonstrated skills who makes a good impression during your interview process is unlikely to be hiding anything. But even the reference calls you conduct on candidates who turn out to be something else should be pleasant and avoid antagonism. After all, employers are on the same side: wanting honest, capable workers for themselves and others. Get as much information as possible without pushing the reference much beyond his (and your own) comfort level. Respect her legal safety zone; stop short of pressing a reference for details if you've sensed a serious threat of legal action hovering in the background. If a reference stonically refuses to provide information beyond dates of employment and positions held, it might be possible to get the name and phone number of an alternate source of information. And always be polite. Remember, the tables could be turned tomorrow, when you yourself are contacted to provide a reference for a former employee. ■

Deborah Beyer is a free-lance writer in Paw Paw, Michigan. This is her first article for Unique Opportunities.