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Don't Avoid the Chance to Check Job References

I am often asked by prospective clients, "How important are employment references today? Are they really worth the effort? And, if I put forth the effort, will anyone share this seemingly sacred information anyway?" My answers to these questions are: "Extremely important." "Absolutely." And, again, "Yes."

Remember Nurse Cullen? "Charles Cullen is a former nurse and the most prolific [serial killer](#) in [New Jersey](#) history," according to Wikipedia. The site goes on to say that "Cullen told authorities in December 2003 that he had murdered as many as 45 patients during the 16 years he worked at 10 hospitals in New Jersey and Pennsylvania."

After committing numerous murders, domestic violence and attempted suicides, Cullen became a licensed nurse in Pennsylvania in 1994. How was Cullen able to not only gain employment but also become a licensed nurse? Wikipedia states that employers feared to investigate the incidents or give a bad employment reference for fear that such actions might trigger a lawsuit.

Prompted by the Cullen case, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and 35 other states adopted new laws which encourage employers to give honest appraisals of workers' job performance and which give employers immunity when they provide a truthful employee appraisal.

Performing professional reference checking is a daily function at my company, and we have had tremendous success in uncovering vital information. This information is often the final piece of the puzzle to determine an offer of employment.

When you are asking yourself whether it is worth your time and energy to do reference checks on candidates, remember that as a company you are responsible for the safety and well-being of your employees and client companies. Consider that past behavior is an indicator of potential future behavior, and acknowledge that a poor hire can cost you a great deal of time, money and aggravation.

So how can you successfully perform reference checks? I advise:

1. Always ask candidates to give you permission to contact any of their past employers and have them sign a release form.
2. Next step is to ask for the names of their immediate supervisors. These are the people with whom you will want to speak.
3. Try not to be directed to HR as they typically will not share much.
4. If a person listed as a reference is hesitant or will not answer questions due to policy, ask if you can contact her or him at home after hours for a personal reference.

There is good protocol to both receiving and providing references:

Etiquette of receiving references:

- Remember that when you are asking performance questions, the company is sharing feedback based on their performance standards versus yours. Always offer your standards and then ask how likely it is that the candidate will fit into this type of requirement.
- If person is hesitant to offer information, explain that this position is critical to the success of your organization and that references are vital to this decision.
- At the beginning of the call, assure the contact that anything he or she shares will be held in complete confidence; and adhere to that. Do not share with anyone but the hiring officials that need to know.
- Never share the feedback with the applicant.

Etiquette of giving references

- Ask for a copy of a signed release form signed by your ex-employee.
- Share facts rather than generalizations. Example: “Johnny was consistently late for work” — incorrect. “Johnny was late for work 17 times in the last six months” — fact. This will keep you out of trouble.
- If there was an incident that was very sticky such as violence, theft or personal problems, do not share information about these things.
- If you do not have the time, find a professional service to help. There are many out there to help you at very reasonable prices. An average employee is going to cost your company in the range of \$35,000 a year and up. Why would you not secure your investment?

Now you can take action. When confronting an employee, one of the most important rules to follow is to focus on facts. A good measure to determine between what is truly factual and what is not is to ask yourself if the “fact” can be argued. If it can be argued, it is not a fact. Facts make for easier and honest communications. Facts will support you well in court. Example of a non-factual confrontation: “Joe, you are constantly coming into work late and signing in that you are arriving on time.” Example of a factual approach: “Joe, over the last 4 weeks I personally witnessed you arriving 15-20 minutes late on 4 occasions. These occurrences were on each of the last 4 Mondays. When I reviewed your timecard it shows that you are arriving on time.”

There are some efforts that we can take to decrease these types of occurrences. This includes taking some time to observe our employees' behaviors more often. Spend time around them and listen; listen well. Sometimes by just taking the time to truly hear our employees we will prevent the bitterness that is often the result of dishonest behavior or even retaliation. As a next step we may choose to learn more about our employees' needs. This can come in the form of simply asking, performing an employee survey or forming task groups to identify issues within our organization. Perhaps we will discover that training is needed. In some cases when employees are more confident in their work performance they will be less likely to act out or be dishonest. Assure that there is a real sense of the ability to openly communicate within our organizations. These are ideas that can work well in any size organization and across all industries.

It comes more naturally to some, but learn to listen to that sixth sense. Our senses grow as a result of years of various types of life and work experiences. Our instincts are a highly valuable resource right up there with our degree, diploma, and work experience and work history. Arguably they may be worth much more. By learning to trust our senses and value what we have learned, we will support our selves and our organizations by utilizing all of the skills we have to offer.

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