FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. Do I need written consent to check references?
A. When requesting references we recommend that you obtain written consent from the candidate. This relieves the current or former employer of any liability in providing reference information. Before contacting the current manager, notify the candidate so s/he can alert the manager to your call.

The Northeastern University application includes a candidate’s written authorization that serves as consent. In addition, you can use the Release Form available on the HRM website which the candidate can sign and give to the current or previous employer.

Q. Who should I share reference information with?
A. All reference information should be confidential with access limited to those within the organization with a need to know.

Q. What kinds of questions are illegal?
A. The discrimination laws that apply to interviewing also apply to reference checking. In order to avoid claims of discrimination, decisions based on references should be made based on objective facts. Do not probe into marital status, age, disabilities, race, religion or national origin.

Q. Should I check references on all final candidates?
A. It depends. If you have only one really appropriate candidate, then you should only check that candidate’s references. If, however, you have two excellent candidates, you can check references other than the current employer on both candidates.

Q. Should one person check all the references for a candidate?
A. You should make certain that references for final candidates are conducted consistently. It is important to obtain references from at least two managers or supervisors to ensure that you have obtained objective information. Ask the same questions of each reference and document the references checked as part of the selection process.

Q. Can I ask others to help in checking references?
A. In order to ensure consistency, it is best if one person does the reference checks. If that is not possible, at least make sure that everyone uses the same set of questions.
Q. What if the candidate’s former employer has a company policy that permits only the verification of employment dates?

A. Before you begin to check references, have the candidate sign the Release Form which can be given to the employer. This releases the employer from any liability as long as the information they provide you is accurate and truthful.

Q. If the candidate is internal, can I contact the candidate’s current supervisor?

A. Yes. As a courtesy, inform the candidate that s/he is being seriously considered for the position and that you will be contacting their current Northeastern supervisor or manager.

Q. What if the candidate only uses personal references?

A. The purpose of obtaining references is to understand how someone performed in a work setting. Personal references do not accomplish this. If the candidate gives only personal references, ask him/her to give you references who can discuss their work performance.

Q. What if the reference does not return my phone calls?

A. In cases where the reference does not return your phone calls, contact the candidate and ask that they let the reference know the importance of returning your call. This usually is effective.

Q. What if the candidate only had one job?

A. If your candidate has had only one job, ask to talk with another person in the organization who is familiar with their work. This could be a co-worker or another manager for whom they did some work.