

Reference – Asking and Giving

A red rectangular graphic with a white background. The text 'WEEKLY LEARNINGS' is in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The year '2023' is in a large, white, cursive font. Above the text, there are several lightbulb icons of varying sizes, some with lines radiating from them, suggesting ideas or learning.

WEEKLY LEARNINGS 2023

Weekly Learnings 10 / 2023

Reference checks are an important part of the hiring process. Reference checking happens as people change jobs, switch industries, take up coaching, take up directorships etc. The old informal men's/women's network is always active, but many institutions want professional reference checks. I got a few requests for reference checks last week of people and here are 10 learning's:

If you are seeking a reference:

1. Have a shortlist of about 6 people (and you pick three) who know you well as a person and a professional and who carry some degree of credibility in society/industry. Ensure that the reference list you have has a spectrum of functions, not just one function. It would also be good for you to refresh your reference list every two to three years as change happens in your career and the referee's career.
2. If you are giving a referee's name for a role you applied to, then do keep the person informed of the role, the context, what happened in the interviews so far, who interviewed you and why you are keen on this role. This context will help your referee position you better.
3. It is important that you pick referees who give a balanced picture and not an overtly one-sided glorious picture. Most institutions and headhunters do not believe this 'best thing since sliced bread reference'. You know who in your list can do this positively and in a balanced way.
4. It would be good for you to send your updated CV to the referee. This will give the person a better feel of what you have done if significant time has lapsed (more than 3 to 4 years) since your last touch point.
5. Update the referee after the job is closed or not closed and give him/her the reason for what you think happened. I always appreciate this.

If you are the referee:

1. Being a referee is important for you as a professional and crucial for the candidate in question. This could be a make-or-break call. If you know you are the referee from the candidate's side and you have been briefed by the candidate, then make time to

write down things about the candidate before the ref check call happens. Jog your memory for the finer details. I always make notes before I get the headhunters call so that I can add value. If the call is blind and you least expect it (this happens many times in a Wapp world), then seek time even if it 30 minutes to put together your notes. Blind calls are difficult to handle and invariably they are some sort of cross check even after the referees have given their inputs.

2. When you are a referee, your credibility is important. I think I have got about 80% right for references I have given for colleagues, bosses, and peers. There is a personal part to a reference and a professional part to a reference. Many people stick to the professional part but adding a color of the personal part will help your candidate. There are times when the candidate has got the job even though my reference wasn't positive about the fit for the role. This happens because the hiring process is vexed and tiring for all concerned and only if there is a serious red flag do people stop to think, else they are happy to go with someone who has decent ref checks.
3. Be as factual as you can be, qualify the comments you make with examples or anecdotes about the person. I always point out the conditions in which the person succeeded and where he/she didn't get desired success. I always put down the role of the boss, the team and the culture that made it work or not work for the candidate.
4. Many people seek recommendations on LinkedIn. I never give a reference if I haven't worked with the person. This is table stakes for me.
5. Most ref checks end with the question "Would you hire the person again?". Again, here do map the context, did you see the candidate as a top 5% candidate, a top 10% candidate etc. Sometimes the candidate has worked elsewhere after working with you and the person on the line wants to know what happened there. Do not guess if you don't know. I always give a good reference to people who have been committed to the institution, who are collaborative, who don't have serious derailers and who I think will fit the new mandate. I always ask the interviewer who this candidate will report to. And signal what type of leadership brings out the best in this person.

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