

Have a strategy for reference checks



SMALL BUSINESS
Jamie Herzlich
jherzlich@aol.com

It's not always easy getting employers to talk about a former worker's performance. But if you can, it can offer valuable insight to help you determine if a job candidate might be the right fit for your organization.

Checking the candidate's references and developing a list of open-ended questions to ask his or her past employer could help you glean valuable information about the applicant.

"When you do a reference check you become like a detective," explains Miriam Berger, talent acquisition specialist at A Hire Authority LLC in Deerfield, Illinois, a contract recruiter. You're listening for nuances in what they're saying and what they're not saying about the candidate, she notes.

The references provided also can offer insight into the candidate, says Berger. For instance, has he provided just friends and family or taken the time to cultivate good work references?

Berger may ask for the names of three past managers, and when she reaches them she'll ask if the candidate let them know she'd be calling. "It tells me if they're serious about the job and if they prepared," she notes.

■ **Explain the job.** She'll also give the reference a brief summary of what the candidate will be doing. "A lot of times things will come out when you're explaining the job," she notes.

■ **Get multiple references,** because not every past employer will speak willingly.

"More and more companies are not really giving information on past employees," says Keith Gutstein, a partner at the law firm of Kaufman Dolowich & Voluck LLP in Woodbury.

■ **Less is OK.** He advises his clients to offer minimal informa-

tion, such as dates of employment and last position held. "You can't go wrong with saying very little," he says.

Because many employers are reluctant to speak, don't consider that a blemish against the applicant, adds Beth Fagin, an employment consultant with Portnoy, Messinger, Pearl & Associates Inc. in Syosset, a human resources consulting firm. It may be company policy not to provide more detailed information.

Most employers ask for three references knowing they may only receive information from one or two, Fagin notes.

■ **Pitfalls.** Still, if a past employer is willing to offer details, you should avoid asking any questions that could be viewed as "inquiring about someone's membership in a protected class," such as religion or national origin, advises Gutstein.

For example, you don't want to ask if the worker took time off for observance of any religious holidays, he notes. If you

KEY QUESTIONS

- What were the candidate's responsibilities?
- Is this person a team player, or does he or she excel by working alone?
- What are the candidate's three strongest qualities?
- Would you rehire this candidate?

Source: Miriam Berger, A Hire Authority LLC

have attendance concerns, you can go to the candidate, explain the job's hours and ask if there are any problems with reporting to work during those hours, Gutstein suggests.

■ **Keep all questions** business-oriented and relevant to the job, he says.

Also stick to open-ended questions, such as what are the candidate's greatest strengths, suggests Heather Huhman,

president of Come Recommended, a Maryland-based content marketing and digital PR consultancy for job search and HR technologies.

Let references take their time to answer questions as fully as they're willing, she advises. The more you get the reference talking, the more you'll learn about the candidate.

Standardize your reference check strategy, suggests Huhman. Create a script and list of questions to help ensure you're getting all the information you need during each call. Remember, the references you're calling are busy too.

■ **Focus on both** a candidate's strengths and weaknesses. References are often reluctant to provide the latter, but you can soften your approach by asking what could the applicant have done better, suggests Fagin.

If they say something you don't want to hear, weigh the responses from all the references. They may balance out.

THE ISSUE: MORTGAGES

Avoiding obstacles to getting approved

MONEYFIX

BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH
Special to Newsday

This summer is on track to be the best home buying season since 2006, with robust demand and a corresponding growth in supply, according to Realtor.com. But before you get excited, realize there are obstacles that might keep you on the outside looking in.

■ **Be prepared:** "Most people search for a home and think about the mortgage after they've found a potential purchase. This is akin to starting retirement planning after you're retired," says Warren Goldberg, president of Mortgage Wealth Advisors in Plainview.

If you have a history of late payments, you expect trouble getting a loan. But your "utilization rate" can also lower your credit score.

"Don't close credit cards with large lines of available credit and only keep the ones with a balance. This increases your utilization rate of available credit, causing your scores to drop," explains Tom Mingo of Capital Management Group of New York in Manhattan.

You're also not in good stead if you don't have enough income to support your debt load, says Matt Hackett of Equity Now, a Manhattan mortgage lender.

■ **Preapproval isn't the end game:** "Lenders pull credit [reports] throughout the process. Making other large purchases or opening new lines of credit can jeopardize your loan," says John Walsh of Total Mortgage Services in Milford, Connecticut.

■ **Sometimes it's not you:** The house could be problematic. For example, "the appraisal on the property doesn't support the purchase price," says Sam Heskell of Nadlan Valuation in Brooklyn.

THE WEEK AHEAD

For more events, visit newsday.com/business

TUESDAY

BNI MEETING | Greenvale

The Perpetual Business Connections chapter of BNI hosts a networking breakfast every Tuesday, open to all business owners and entrepreneurs, 7-8:30 a.m., Tuesday, Greenvale Townhouse Restaurant, 49 Glen Cove Rd., free for first-time guests, 516-741-4723.

AFTER HOURS | FARMINGDALE

Farmingdale Chamber of Commerce hosts a networking event, open to all, bring your business cards, 5:30-7:30 p.m., CaraCara Mexican Grill, 354 Main St., free admission, complimentary appetizers, cash bar, register online at bit.ly/1M058Oc, 516-286-7800.

PRODUCT SHOWCASE | Hauppauge

Suffolk County Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club meeting for inventors with patents pending, who have sold or licensed inventions and those who have ideas but don't know where to start, club members can display their inventions to receive feedback from fellow inventors, 7-9 p.m., H. Lee Dennison Building, 100 Veterans Memorial Hwy., use east entrance to the building, free, reserve, suffolkcountyny.gov, 631-853-4805.

WEDNESDAY

LETIP BUSINESS BREAKFAST | Bohemia

Learn how to grow your business through qualified referrals, 7-8:30 a.m., Airport Diner, 3760 Veterans Memorial Hwy., free, letipbohemia.com, 631-281-6200.

THURSDAY

FRAUD & CYBER SECURITY | Hauppauge

Seminar on how to protect your business against data breaches, mitigate risks and find resources to help, presented by TFCUUniversity, 7:45-10 a.m., TFCU headquarters, 102 Motor Pkwy., free, includes breakfast, register, tfcu4u.org, 631-698-7000, ext. 3024.

CLEAN ENERGY CAPITAL FORUM | Melville

Continental breakfast and networking followed by a keynote speaker, presentations and an investor panel, 8-11 a.m., RxR Executive Plaza, 58 South Service Rd., \$65, registration suggested, 516-712-4911.

NETWORKING | Miller Place

Hosted by North Brookhaven Chamber of Commerce, 7-9 p.m., Arthur Edwards Pool and Spa Centre, 929 Route 25A, free, cost for food and drinks, register, bit.ly/1CubfHC, 516-458-4448.

FRIDAY

SMALL BUSINESS HELP | Southampton

One-on-one counseling presented by Service Corps of Retired Executives; sessions by appointment, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., Rogers Memorial Library, 91 Coopers Farm Rd., free, call to register, 631-283-0774, ext. 505.

— GINA TABARUS

SEND NOTICES to Business Calendars, Newsday Events, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250; fax 631-843-2688, or email events@newsday.com