

6 Must-Ask Questions for Checking Candidate References

When you're looking for a great candidate to fill an important role, it's easy to get swept up by a stellar application. But while a well-written resume filled with impressive accomplishments is certainly a promising sign, it's important to remember that it's just one factor. To really understand whether a candidate would be the right fit, it's always a good idea to talk to the people who know best: their references.

Here are the top 6 questions you should pose to every candidate's references:

1

How would you describe the candidate's reliability and dependability?

Recruiters often expect qualities like reliability, punctuality and self-motivation to be givens in a candidate, not differentiators. But that doesn't mean you should simply assume that a candidate possesses these traits without checking first.

2

What are the candidate's strengths and weaknesses?

There's a good chance you'll ask the candidate what their strengths and weaknesses are during the interview itself, but you should verify key attributes with their references. The similarity between the two responses can show you how self-aware a candidate is, and can also give you better insight into whether or not the candidate is a good match for your particular company and the role at hand.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CONTACTING REFERENCES

Before you grab your phone, there are a couple of important things to keep in mind.

✓ **Clearly identify the role to the reference.**

So that you get an accurate picture of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the specific role for which they're being considered, be sure the person you're speaking with understands the job description right from the start.

✓ **Avoid discriminatory questions.**

Do not ask questions about a candidate's personal life, such as their age, familial status, religion, sexual orientation, political allegiance, etc.

3 What was one of the candidate's most memorable accomplishments while working with you?

The difference between a good candidate and a great candidate can often be traced back to whether they regularly went above and beyond their everyday responsibilities — something this question does a great job of shedding light on.

4 What type of work environment do you think the candidate would be most likely to thrive in — and why?

Remember: When you're interviewing a candidate, you're not just trying to figure out if they're the right person for your company. You also want to verify that your company is the right place for them. If your company isn't the sort of place where a candidate can thrive, they're much more likely to underperform or quit.

5 What skills would you have liked to see the candidate develop to reach their full potential?

Very rarely will you encounter a candidate who meets every one of your desired qualifications, but asking a question like this will help you identify skill gaps. If the prior knowledge of the missing skills is critical to the success of the role, you'll want to actively assess the candidate's willingness to work toward improving in those areas — or move on to a more qualified candidate.

6 Would you recommend this candidate?

It's a straightforward question, but one that shouldn't be ignored. Some references may feel obligated to highlight positive things about the candidate when asked about their strengths and weaknesses or accomplishments, but with a question as blunt as this, it will be much more apparent whether they are truly enthusiastic in their endorsement of a candidate — perhaps the best predictor of a candidate's future success.

With these six questions, you have plenty of structure for your conversation with a reference to get the honest feedback you need to make an informed decision about your candidate.