

Negotiating references

A guide to negotiating effective
referee relationships



CONTENTS

Why do you need referees?	1
Steps to negotiate with a potential referee	2
How can you let your referee know you?.....	3
What will your referee comment on?.....	4
Further reading.....	8
Counselling and career development services at Unisa	9

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Asking someone to be your referee is a process of negotiating a relationship with an individual who is able to comment on you as a professional. Your referees are part of your professional network and can have a very positive impact on your career and academic development. Asking someone to be your referee does not mean it is a lifelong relationship if it is not being negotiated from both sides. It is therefore important for you to keep in touch with your referee to build the relationship you want. You need to consider that your referee is supporting your application and his or her integrity and judgement can be questioned if the information provided does not match with how you present yourself. It is therefore important for you to think about how you will enable this person to be able to comment positively about you and your performance. Since this is an ongoing relationship, you need to start negotiating with a referee long before you will need him or her – it will be difficult for a referee to honestly comment on you as a professional if you have not been in touch for some time.

Ask yourself:

How have you allowed yourself to be known by your referee so that she/he can share with others what they know about you in the professional context?

Why do you need referees?

You may need a referee to comment on your suitability for:

- employment (“job reference”) or

- further studies (“character and/or academic referee”)

For example, you are applying for a position at an organisation and they would then contact your referee(s) to help them make a decision about appointing you. Some qualifications that are aligned to professional registration (e.g. psychology at Master's level, social work training at the undergraduate level), would need a referee form or letter to comment on your suitability for training in terms of your character, past behaviour and your potential as a prospective professional in the field.

You can also negotiate with your referee to have conversations about your applications processes. For example, you can also have a conversation with your referee about your challenges (for example, you are applying for a lot of positions, but you are not invited for interviews).

Steps to negotiate with a potential referee

1. Start by making a list of possible referees – who knows you well enough to be able to comment about you and your work performance for the roles you are interested in? You will not ask any person to be your referee; you need to think about the reasons why you choose this person to be your referee.
2. Speak to your potential referees before listing them to negotiate a reference and to get the referees' current contact details.
3. Send your CV to your referees and inform them about possible job roles or further studies you want to apply for.
4. Keep in touch with your referees throughout your job search process or study application process and give feedback about your progress.
5. Evaluate the relevance of a specific referee at least once a year.

How can you let your referee know you?

- Find a way to express your individuality.
- Ask good questions, in fact, ask any questions (professional questions) to help you develop professionally.
- Be confident.
- Take on challenging assignments. This will help you grow.
- Engage with your potential referee at all times, this involves;
 - Being actively involved in the activities that are assigned to you.
 - Show growth – professional, academic and/or personal.
 - Just be – personality or just being the real you cannot be faked.
 - Be confident in everything you do, and stand by what you say or believe in.
 - Ask for assistance where you feel you need one, it is okay not knowing or not being okay.
 - Ask your potential referee for feedback about you, so you know where to improve next. When asking for feedback, be specific about what you want feedback on.
 - Make an effort so that your potential referee can see that you are a hard worker and a willing individual.
- Always remember why you want the relationship:
 - What kind of relationship do you wish to negotiate – it will always be a professional relationship, but you can also negotiate mentoring.
 - How does this relationship affect you? What are you learning from this relationship
 - Does the relationship fulfil what it is supposed to fulfil?

- Is the relationship positive or negative?
 - Do I see the benefits of this relationship?
 - Does my referee know me well to a point where he or she can comment about me?
 - Do I need to keep this referee, or do I need to start negotiating other referee relationships?
- Most importantly, keep your referee informed about your progress, changes, and achievements that are happening in your life.

Always remember that your referee does not expect you to be a "ready-made bread" but rather in the process of being made – referees are asked to comment on your developmental areas and how you have overcome challenges.

What will your referee comment on?

Below are four examples of sets of questions that are asked on referee forms. Some questions would be to rate the candidate and others are open-ended questions (for example, describe the strengths of a candidate). It would be important for you to reflect on how you think your referee may rate or describe you.

EXAMPLE 1:

Indicate to what extent candidate X does the following:

- Meet attendance and punctuality guidelines
- Follows instructions and responds to management direction
- Takes responsibility for own actions
- Keeps commitments made
- Volunteers for work easily

- Asks for help when needed
- Accepts new increased responsibilities
- Exhibits sound and accurate judgement
- Exhibits ability to learn new skills
- Requires minimal supervision
- Uses resources effectively
- Practices what s/he has been trained in
- Is able to work cooperatively with others
- Demonstrates accuracy and thoroughness
- Applies feedback to improve quality
- Monitors own work to ensure quality
- Works quickly
- Achieves established goals

EXAMPLE 2:

Please comment on the following with regards to candidate X:

- **Problem-solving:** The ability to identify and define a problem effectively (gather and analyse information and create options in order to generate a workable solution).
- **Judgment:** The ability to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant information and appropriate criteria for weighting it.
- **Stress handling:** The capacity to manage disruptive emotions and impulses and remain functional focused and level-headed in situations of stress or pressure.
- **Objectivity:** The ability to separate own feelings, views, beliefs and attitudes from a situation by remaining non-judgmental.
- **Drive/ Initiative:** The orientation towards energetically pursuing goals and activities in a sustainable manner. (Ability to identify and take advantage of opportunities).

- Rule-orientation (achievement through conformity): The ability to achieve results following rules and procedures. Applicable legislation, rules and procedures.
- Excellence orientation (concern for high-quality work): Follow-through; the motivation to ensure the highest standards of quality and productivity are consistently maintained (attention to detail consciousness/accuracy /neatness)
- Personal Development: The ability to identify own strengths and weaknesses and the willingness to learn.
- Investigative Orientation (probing /information seeking): The capacity to ask questions, plan and make effective use of resources and expertise to research relevant information.
- Diversity Management: The capacity to respect and relate well to differences in people (In terms of race culture, nationality gender ethics, religion, etc.) value diversity of ideas and create an environment in which diverse people can thrive
- Teamwork: The capacity to create group synergy in pursuing collective goals. This includes a capacity to promote a friendly co-operative climate, understand group dynamics and apply appropriate facilitation techniques in working with others to achieve shared goals.
- Conflict Management: The capacity to utilize the most effective conflict resolution strategies appropriate to the situation. This entails the ability to facilitate a conflict resolution and allow for understanding between different parties.
- People Management: The ability to manage and motivate people, provide constructive feedback, coaching, skills training and timelines and performance standards.
- Strategic Planning: The capacity to develop strategies aligned to the core business, to anticipate challenges and evaluate alternatives.
- Organizing: The ability to coordinate tasks required to accomplish goals and assign responsibilities and resources to ensure an efficient/effective flow of work.

- Monitoring & Evaluation: The capacity to define, encourage and evaluate staff performance in relation to clearly defined objectives, timelines and performance standards.

EXAMPLE 3:

Evaluate candidate X on the following characteristics:

- Reliability
- Self-discipline
- Emotional maturity
- Flexibility
- Responsibility
- Ethical behaviour
- Academic potential
- Interpersonal sensitivity
- Accuracy

EXAMPLE 4:

- What do you consider as the applicant's strengths and weaknesses?
- In your opinion, in which area/s (training or experience) would the candidate require more development and support?
- How does the candidate relate to supervisors, colleagues and other people that he/she deals with?
- What type of interaction did the candidate have with other levels of staff, e.g. information sharing, liaison, advocacy, etc?
- Would you please comment on the candidate's communication skills - written and verbal communication?
- What is/was the extent of the candidate's participation in meetings/ presentations/ training/information sessions? etc.
- Describe the candidate's approach to the general public and clients.
- Describe how well the candidate deals (dealt) with pressure, for example, meeting deadlines, ability to adapt to changing priorities? Handle large volumes of work? Juggle several projects at the same time? etc.

- Please comment on the candidate's management of resources (physical, financial and human).
- How much supervision does the candidate need?
- Please comment on the candidate's level of integrity?
- How would you describe the candidate's personal standard of performance?
- Did the candidate have a performance review? What were the comments?
- Would you re-employ him/her? If not why?

Further reading

- The reference check you didn't know you were getting
<https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-reference-check-you-didnt-know-you-were-getting>
- Why back-door references can affirm (or sink) hiring decisions (Kevin Chou)
https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-i-hire-why-back-door-references-can-affirm-sink-hiring-kevin-chou?src=?trk=li_corpblog_corp_amychen_howihire
- What I'm looking for isn't in your resumé
https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-i-hire-what-im-looking-isnt-your-resume-ralph-de-la-vega?src=?trk=li_corpblog_corp_amychen_howihire

Counselling and career development services at Unisa

The Unisa Directorate: Counselling and Career Development offers career-, academic- and personal counselling services to Unisa students and the broader community. You can talk to a counsellor about:

- **Career decisions.** I am not sure which career path to follow; I don't know which qualification would be best; I want to change my career direction...
- **Career information.** How can I find out more about a career in ...
- **Employability.** How do I market myself to employers? How can I look for work? How can I compile an effective CV? How do I go about networking with others? How do I put together my career portfolio? How can I meet potential employers? How can I improve my interview skills?)
- **My studies at Unisa.** How can I get started with my studies? How do I plan my studies? How can I study more effectively? I don't feel motivated to continue with my studies... I feel worried about preparing for/ writing the exams. I failed my exams – what now? I need to improve my reading/ writing/ numeracy skills
- **Personal issues.** How can I have better relationships with others? How can I cope more effectively with issues that impact on my studies?

Visit our website at <http://www.unisa.ac.za/counselling> to access many self-help resources, or talk to a counsellor by e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za.