

Training & Management

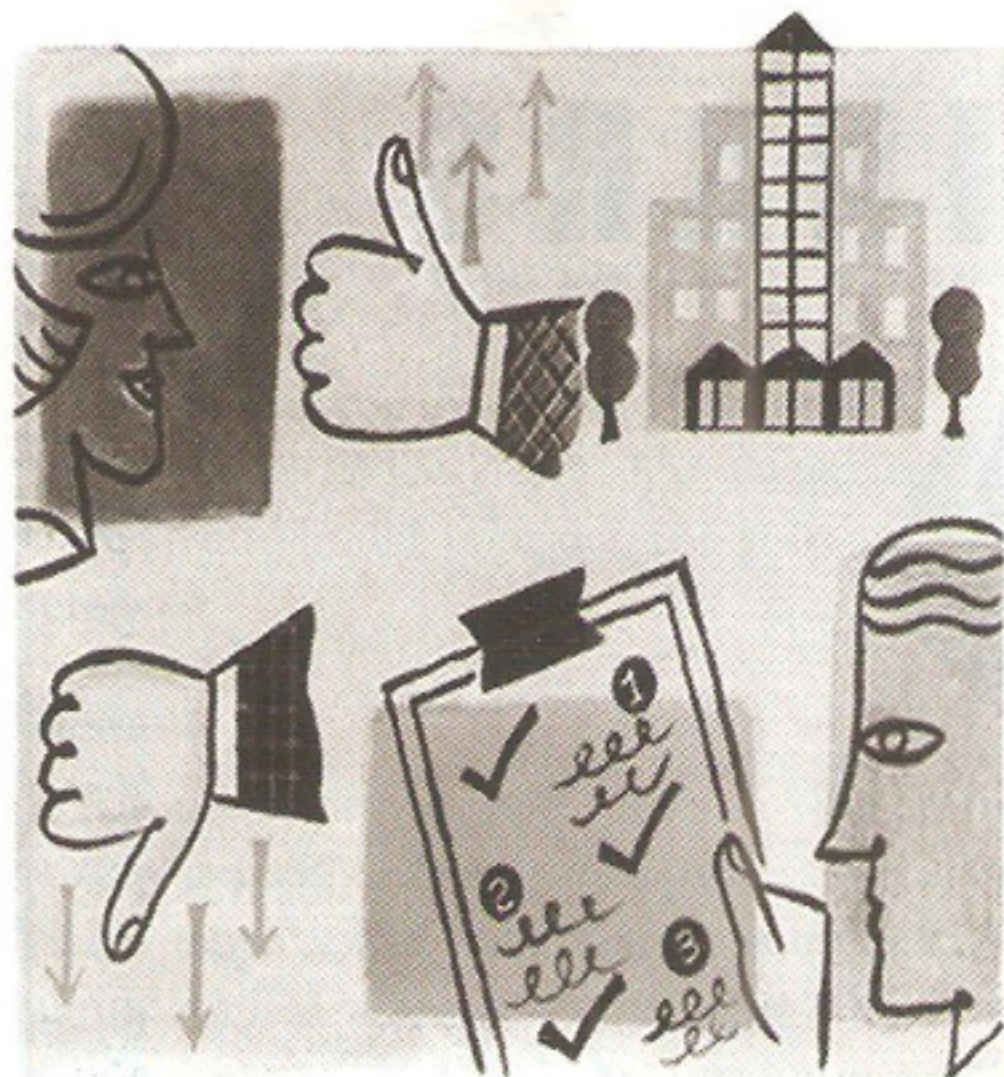
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Student's Corner

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Don't forget those reference checks!

Conduct interviews and tests, but find the truth behind references as well.

BY R S JAGDEV

For decades, personnel practitioners, academic staff, and line managers alike have praised and endorsed the employment interview in the selection process. While a great deal has been written and said about the interview, considerably less has been expressed about reference checking in the selection process. The little research that has been done on reference checking does not show significant differences in validity as compared with the interview. There is usually some question, however, about the depth and expertness involved. All too often, a junior personnel assistant in the organisation is given the responsibility for "checking out" the references although he or she may not even be involved in the rest of the selection activities. In other words, reference

checking is seen by some organisations as really nothing more than a routine clerical task, and it is treated as such. It is no wonder, then, that the results are often of little value in the selection or placement decision.

Properly conducted, reference checks can reveal highly relevant information about job applicants. They can confirm or negate statements made by the applicant in the interview setting, where exaggeration and understatement are commonplace. Information about an applicant supplied by a previous supervisor is surely more valid than that obtained in the 30-minute interview. Data from the former may be gathered over a period of several years of observing the individual's performance; data from the latter are surmised from statements made by a person



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hoping to land a job. Granted, the reports made by previous supervisors are sometimes contaminated with highly subjective comments, but the fact remains that these people are in a better position to judge the strengths and shortcomings of the applicant in the work place. Where the inter-rater reliability appears high among previous supervisors, particularly on individual traits, one would be foolish to ignore the relevance of the data in the ultimate selection decision.

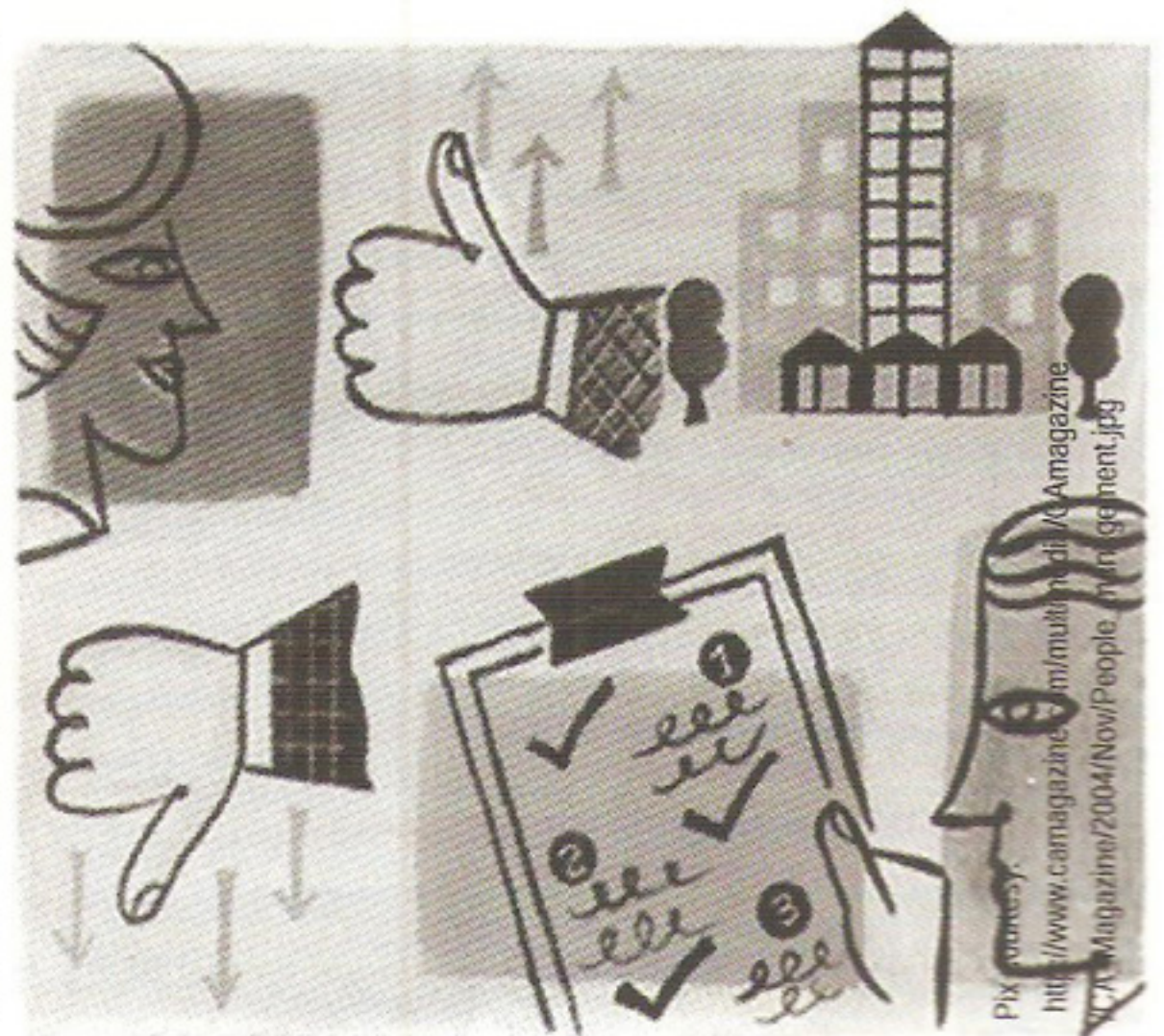
To this point, there has been an underlying assumption that the candidate has a previous work background and that reference checking is done with several different previous supervisors. Obviously, the task becomes much more difficult when the candidate, for example, has just graduated from college and has no work experience. Reference checks with professors teaching undergraduate programmes usually reveal little about students outside of their examination and term paper grades. The professors certainly can't be faulted as they might be teaching classes in excess of a hundred students. In graduate programmes, on the other hand, the classes are often smaller and there is a much closer relationship between student and professor. Personal evaluations of students in this case often go beyond the academic sphere and can be most useful to the employer.

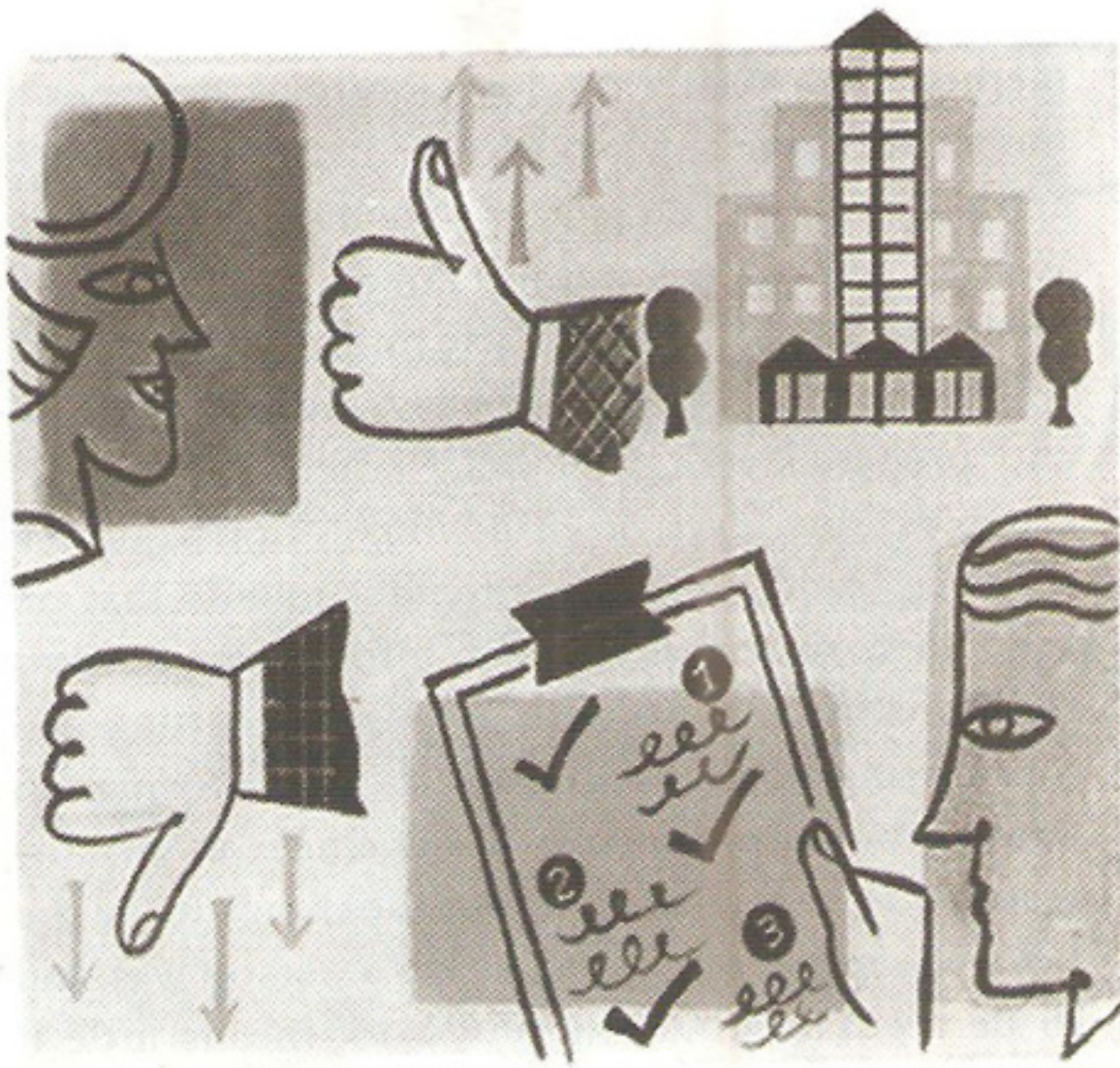
How then do you go about conducting an effective reference check that will produce job-related information about an applicant? First of all, there is the matter of the specific references supplied by the applicant. These are usually interpreted as "character references" and include everyone from clergy to relatives to neighbours. The information these references supply is usually generalised, guarded and positive in tone, although enthusiastically given.

A previous supervisor represents a much more important source of relevant information about the applicant. Usually applicants will give previous supervisors as references, but if they don't, it would be wise to contact them anyway. You never know when an applicant may be trying to hide unfavourable information that could be obtained from a former supervisor. Communication can be by letter by telephone, or in person. The last

method is probably the best, but it is not always the most practical when you are considering many applicants and contacting even more references. Written references rarely cover the complete applicant, they are particularly remiss in stating the shortcomings and are usually carefully planned and prepared with an eye to potential unsavory repercussions, even legal actions. Consequently, they are bland, uninformative documents that do little more than verify factual information such as positions held with the organisation, starting and terminating dates, salary, and so on. Information about the applicant's performance is usually restricted to a statement about the things he or she did well on the job. The fact that a person was said to be accurate in accounting work means little if the individual took forever to do it and never met the required deadlines. Also, there's the manager who fired an employee for incompetence but doesn't want to offer a bad reference and jeopardise the worker's chances of obtaining employment elsewhere. How about the manager who wants to get rid of a current employee and writes a glowing reference for the individual? Unethical? Certainly it is, but it has gone on for a long time and is likely to continue. How do you avoid receiving potentially fallacious information about an applicant?

Your first task in the reference check is to identify yourself and the person about whom you are inquiring. When you have determined that the reference does know the applicant, you should establish the length and nature of the relationship.





For example, was the reference a supervisor, a subordinate, or a colleague. You might then ask for verification of certain facts supplied by the applicant, such as position, salary, and dates of employment. Such an enquiry about factual data serves to "break the ice" and to establish the propriety of your call. Should you meet resistance about your identity or the validity of your telephone call, you might ask the reference to call you back. In this way, he or she can consult the telephone directory to determine if the number you give corresponds to the listing for your organisation. Another method is to suggest a personal meeting in which you could produce satisfactory identification. Either of these suggestions usually results in obtaining the necessary cooperation of the reference.

Conducting a reference check can be likened to conducting an employment interview in many respects. In both, there is an initial rapport-establishing phase in which the interviewer attempts to create a non-threatening environment. Then, in a series of skillfully posed questions, the interviewer draws out information about the applicant, listening for clues in the responses that signal the need for further probing for the whys and wherefores underlying the answers. Just as you might ask an applicant "Why did you decide on that course of action? You might enquire of a reference "Why do you suppose the individual decided on that course of action?" Similarly, your probing should also be aimed at the statements

made by the reference: "Why do you say that about this person?" forces the reference to substantiate the personal views put forward about the applicant. Sometimes a question like "Where would you rate the individual with respect to other employees in terms of planning ability: at the top, in the middle, or at the bottom?" forces the reference to take some kind of a stand in responding. Another question that can be used effectively is "Can you give me examples to illustrate that point?" Once again, you're requiring the reference to back up his or her statements with factual evidence. With probing and follow-up questions, you will often extract valuable, relevant information from the reference, and you won't have to resort to an old stand-by, "What are this person's major strengths and weaknesses?" which rarely works because it frequently puts the reference on the defensive.

It is important, however, to try to obtain information about both the strong and weak points of the applicant. A totally glowing report is no more useful to you than a totally negative one. You should persist gently and tactfully until you have a balanced picture of the person. Listen for the hesitant to flattering comment from the reference and be sure to pursue with a perhaps blunt observation, such as "I have the feeling that you have some reservations. Could you fill me in on these?" If you find the reference becoming obviously reticent back off and make a mental note to return to the topic later, possibly from another angle.

When you think you have secured as much information as possible about the applicant, you might bring the conversation to a conclusion with the catch all "Is there anything else you can tell us about this person that will help us make a more effective placement decision?" Occasionally, this question will bring out facts that never came out because a more specific enquiry was not made. You should then thank the reference for the time and trouble and offer reciprocation if it is appropriate.

One way of lessening the chances of using misinformation or grossly exaggerated data from references is to check with several people who know the applicant. You should attempt to contact at least three references in each instance.

Personality conflicts between employer and employee have frequently resulted in the employer giving the terminated person an unjustified, wholly negative reference. If you rely entirely on the comments of one contact, you are running the risk of basing your decision on potentially questionable data. On the other hand if you have several different sources reporting the same thing about an applicant, you can feel reasonably secure in concluding the information is valid. In other words, if previous supervisors in three separate companies relate that you applicant was a loner, you can be reasonably sure the applicant will exhibit that tendency in your job.

Occasionally you will encounter a situation in which an applicant has worked in the same organisation for many years and is still there. What should you do about reference? First of all, if the applicant is still employed with the firm, be sure to ask the individual for permission to contact the present employer prior to doing so. If the applicant recoils at this suggestion, you might offer reassurance that you are requesting this in his or her best interests and that without additional information your selection or placement decision would be most difficult. If the problem is mainly with the immediate supervisor and the potential jeopardy of the applicant's current position, ask the individual to recommend others in the organisation who know him/ her and his/her work habits. They might be colleagues or even subordinates who could be asked in confidence to provide a discreet reference. If this approach is out of the question, try others outside of the organisation who might deal with the individual on a regular business basis. For example, you might consider suppliers, government inspectors, auditors, or sales representatives. At least with these people you are more likely to obtain a view of your applicant from the perspective of the working situation.

Reference checks often reveal what an applicant will do or does do on the job as opposed to what the individual claims in an interview to be capable of doing. The smooth-talking interviewee can create an attractive picture of himself or herself, and interviewers are frequently hoodwinked by the facility of expression and response. The proof of competent performance,

however, is in the proverbial pudding, and one of the best sources of determining performance results is the previous supervisor in the work, academic or a vocational setting. Nonetheless, you can use your imagination and creativity in selecting people for references. Sometimes a "best friend," while obviously biased, can unearth profoundly important characteristics about an applicant that account for motivation and behaviour. Similarly, a "worst enemy" may disclose useful data about perceived shortcomings. The significant objective in doing a reference check is to obtain a balanced view of the prospective employee that will allow you to make a more effective decision about whether or not to hire.

The personnel selection process should be seen not as consisting of a single device but as a combination of activities complementing and supplementing each other. Your chances of success are enhanced when you correlate findings from the interview with those of written tests, reference checks, performance reviews, assessment centers, and so on. Such a process is also infinitely fairer to the job applicant, who may not do well in one area but can shine in another.

The next time you are required to hire someone, conduct your interviews and your validated tests by all means, but don't forget those reference checks! ♡

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