

how to

check references



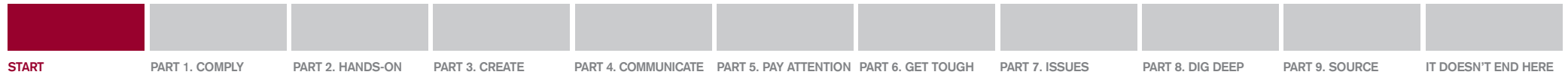
part of the "how to" online series by Robert Half

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Can references ever be relied on 100 per cent? Bound by legislation and living in fear of lawsuits will a candidate's former employer really be able to give an honest reference? How do you get round the problem of employers refusing to give a reference? Does it constitute a bad reference if they refuse to give one?

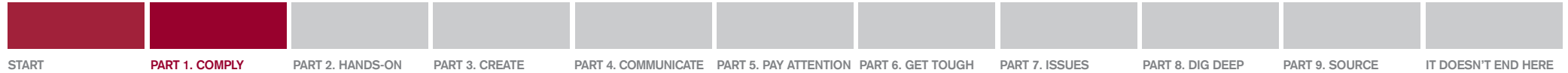
With so many questions and doubts around reference-checking, it is no surprise that hiring managers check references less often than they should. Checking references may be both time-consuming and frustrating but it is a very necessary part of the hiring process. Hopefully the information given in this guide will give you some practical advice on the best ways to make reference checks work for you, and save you a lot of time and frustration in the long run.

Checking references requires time and careful attention.

- Part 1:** Keep it legal
- Part 2:** Don't delegate
- Part 3:** Be creative
- Part 4:** Communication is key
- Part 5:** Don't forget the obvious
- Part 6:** Get tough
- Part 7:** Common problems
- Part 8:** Separation anxiety
- Part 9:** Consider the reference's reference

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PART 1: KEEP IT LEGAL

Remember: Any information you come across when you check references must be kept confidential.

Many managers are reluctant to even start a reference call because of the potential legal ramifications if the call goes bad. By understanding the basics and sticking to some of the same standards you follow for other hiring activities, the call will be less intimidating and easier to manage. Here are some tips you can follow:

- Check with the candidate - It's always good practice to get the candidate's written approval first - not only to check the references they've supplied, but to be able to contact additional reference sources.
- Take caution - The same discrimination laws apply to reference checking as to interviewing. Do not ask about marital status, age, religion, disabilities or national origin.
- Ask a lawyer - It is always a good idea to review your reference-checking procedures with your legal team.
- Be discrete - Any information gleaned from references is confidential and it is not good practice to discuss what you've learnt with other employees in your organisation.



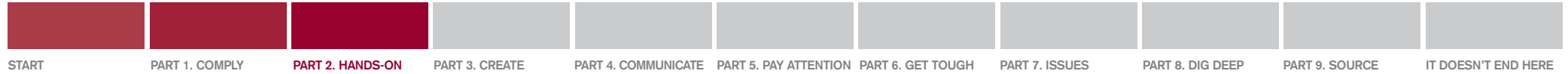
“The same discrimination laws apply to reference checking as to interviewing.”

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PART 2: DON'T DELEGATE

Remember: It is in your company's best interest for you to get the facts directly from the sources.

In our *How to hire effectively* eBook we pointed out how costly a bad hire can be to your organisation. Checking references is one of the best insurance policies you have to prevent these bad hires, and it is a far more effective policy if you:

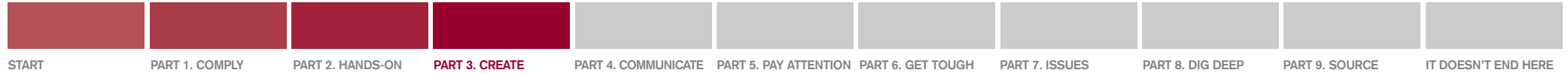
- Do it yourself - If the new employee will be reporting directly to you, then you should be the person who checks the references.
- Work around time constraints - If time is of the essence and you really do have to assign this task of checking references, then compromise by assigning just part of the reference checking to a capable assistant. Handle as much as you can by yourself.
- Aim high - It's always good to speak with those who have managed your potential employee. Make sure you speak to your counterpart to ensure an open conversation as there will be common ground between you.



“Handle as much as you can by yourself.”

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PART 3: BE CREATIVE

Remember: It pays to think laterally when conducting references.

Whilst HR departments can confirm the position and dates of employment of the candidate, they rarely have enough day to day contact to rate them on their job performance and ability. So who should you contact to get an honest and reliable reference?

- The obvious - These are the references the candidate gives you. Be sure to work your way through their entire list. The more responses you get, the easier it will be to get a fair representation of the candidate.
- Their boss - Speak to their line manager and the person they report to as these are the people who should know the candidate's work the best.
- Your counterpart - The person who does the same work you do at the company you're contacting for a reference is likely to be completely honest with you. Call it a form of kinship.
- Network - Ask some of those who give you references to also give you the name of someone else within their organisation. Then ask that new contact to recommend another and repeat the process. That way you can ensure you are reaching people beyond the candidate's 'friends'.
- Get personal - Whilst relatives and teachers generally have limited value in reference checking, it can't hurt to contact a few to get a more rounded view of the individual.
- Your own contacts - Your friends or friends' friends may know the candidate or someone at their company.



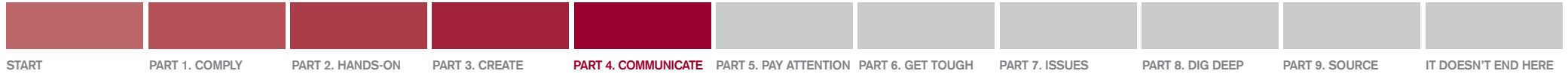
“Speak to their line manager and the person they report to as these are the people who should know the candidate's work the best.”

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PART 4: COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Remember: One to one contact is best.

Remember

When it comes to references, there are no shortcuts. The passive approach (relying on written references) and the high-tech approach (relying on email) cannot guarantee thorough, trustworthy references. You'll always need to communicate with someone directly and verbally to gather the best information.

- Carry a grain of salt - Don't rely on written references handed to you by candidates. Many are prepared at the time of termination and sometimes are written more out of guilt than anything else.
- Embrace the hard way - Letters or emails sent to companies are usually ignored. Checking a reference is best done by verbally connecting with a real person.
- Pick up the phone - Calling the referee gives you the opportunity to ask spontaneous questions. You will also have the added advantage of being able to detect enthusiasm - or lack of it - in the referee's voice.



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PART 5: DON'T FORGET THE OBVIOUS

Remember: Start with some basic questions.

Remember

Any reference call should be a low-pressure conversation, so it's important to start off easy. Keep in mind that you can get more effective responses to a series of questions if you start with the simple ones such as:

- How long did the candidate work for your organisation?
- What type of work did the candidate do?
- What did the candidate earn?
- Did that include bonus/overtime/incentives?
- Where did the candidate work prior to joining your company?

“These questions are easy to answer so there is no pressure on the respondent.”

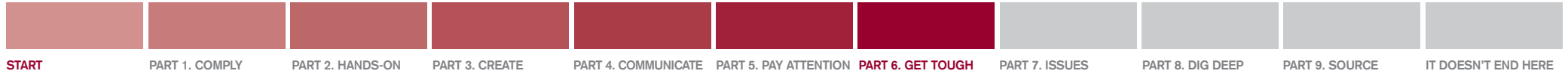


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PART 6: GET TOUGH

Remember: To find out the real truth, you have to ask probing questions.

Now that you've asked the basic questions and eased into the reference call, it's time to move on to more substantial topics. Here are some tough questions to ask in order to assess a potential employee's capabilities:

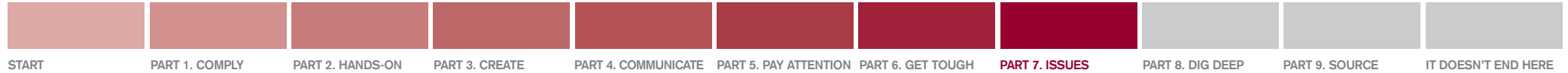
- How does the candidate compare to the person who is doing the job now?
- If the candidate was that good, why didn't you try to persuade them to stay?
- Can you describe some of the candidate's shortcomings?
- On average how many times a month was the candidate absent from work?
- What kind of people did the candidate struggle to work with?
- When there was a particularly urgent task, what steps did the candidate take to get it done on time?
- Would you rehire the candidate in the future?



“Always ask whether they would rehire the candidate in the future.”

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PART 7: COMMON PROBLEMS

Remember: Checking references can be like walking through a minefield.

Not everyone is as open and honest with references as you would like them to be. From the thousands of reference calls we've made, we've discovered that referees generally fit into certain types or categories. Here are 5 common types you might encounter:

- Stonewallers - Because of the risk of lawsuits, referees are often reluctant to provide any information beyond the dates of the candidate's employment.
- Masters of ambiguity - When people want to avoid answering a question, they'll quickly sidestep by changing the conversation to something they are more comfortable talking about. If you feel you don't fully understand what the reference means by a certain response, be direct and ask them what they mean.
- Vengeful references - Sometimes employers are so angry that a good employee is leaving, they will go out of their way to give a bad reference. If you suspect this is the case, then check out as many other references as possible just to make sure.
- Questionable references - Sometimes you have to check the referee's reference! If you receive one extremely negative reference amongst a handful of outstanding ones, then call several of the people you've already spoken to at the same company and ask them pointedly whether they know of a problem between the employee and the referee in question.
- Evasive referees - You've called several times and left messages yet the referee is still not calling you back. Be persistent as the very fact that he is avoiding your call can be suspicious.



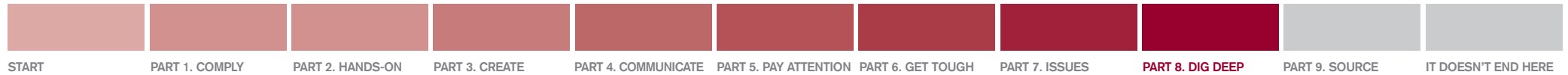
“If someone is avoiding your call, be persistent.”

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PART 8: SEPARATION ANXIETY

Remember: It is important to do a thorough reference check so you can find out the real reason why a candidate has left a job.

It is often difficult to uncover the real reason a candidate has left a job as the word ‘fired’ is rarely used. It’s often hidden behind phrases such as “we agreed to disagree” or “we came to a mutual understanding”.

At some time or another most people will find themselves unexpectedly out of work whether they were fired or made redundant. So, if employers won’t hire people who have been let go from a position, then they are cutting out a large portion of the job market. But, it is important to do a thorough reference check so you can find out why the candidate really left.

Here are several reasons that a referee may give you as to why the employee left, and some examples of how you can dig a little deeper. Keep in mind that you’re trying to find out more about the employee, not conduct a police inquiry, so frame your questions in a positive tone:

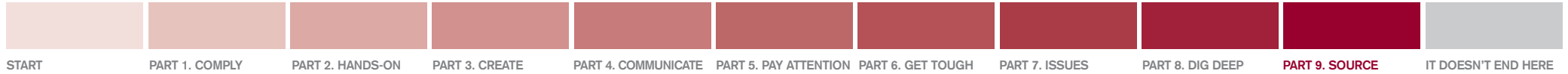
- “He wanted more money”: Ask why he wasn’t offered more in order to ensure he stayed.
- “She did such a good job she effectively made her job unnecessary”: Ask why, if she was such a good employee, she wasn’t transferred into a necessary role.
- “We outsourced her position and had to make redundancies”: Ask why she wasn’t offered a role with a different division, or in the case of a smaller company, why she wasn’t offered training so that she could take on some new responsibilities.

“Dig a little deeper and uncover why someone really leaves.”



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PART 9: CONSIDER YOUR SOURCES

Remember: When evaluating a candidate, always consider the source.

Since open and honest references can be hard to come by it is worth considering the candidate's source. It is often safer to hire people who were recommended to you, but even then remember to do a thorough job of checking references.

The best ways to find good employees are:

- Current employees - Promoting from within is often the best and safest method.
- Former employees - These are people who used to work for your company and now realise that they want to come back. You know how well they work yet it is still wise to check references from any organisation they have since worked at.
- Recommendations from friends - Often worth considering yet always check references as even friends can sometimes be less than candid.
- Specialised recruiters - Specialised recruiters will have a strong network of contacts and know who the better candidates are.

“It is often safer to hire people who are recommended to you.”

We asked executives “Would you be willing to hire an ex-employee?”

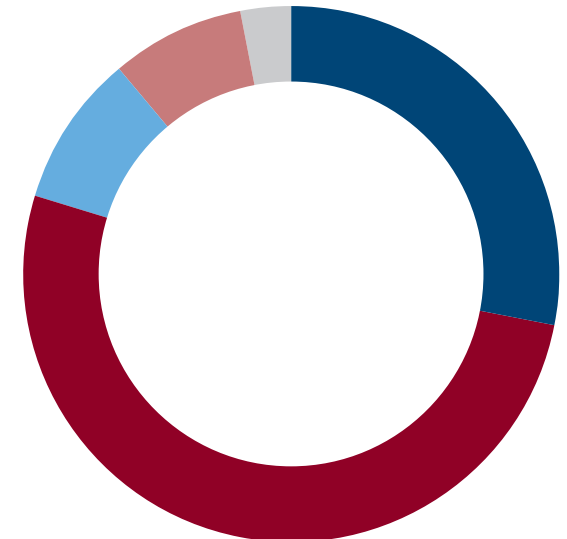
28% Yes, of course

51% Yes, but after thorough screening

9% No, I don't think so

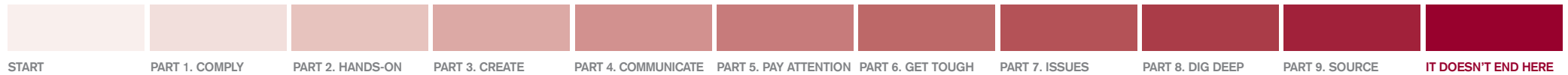
8% No, definitely not

3% Don't know



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IT DOESN'T END HERE

This latest guide in our eBook series was designed to share our insights gleaned from years of working with candidates and clients across all kinds of industries.

But it doesn't end here. We are always looking to learn about more effective ways to check references. If you have any tips, or nuggets of information to share, please do get in touch.

We're here to help you with your recruiting needs.

Contact the office nearest you for more information:

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