



ROBERT HALF PODCAST SERIES

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Interviewee: Kevin Jarvis

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Stuart: Hello, and welcome to the Robert Half podcast series. I'm Stuart Cameron. These days when we hear about staffing and recruitment, we hear about candidates and employers, applications and interviews. We don't hear much about a critical part of the hiring process, the deciding factor in many cases, reference checking. Anyone hiring staff would do well to sharpen their reference checking process and any candidate should understand that it's not enough to ace the interview anymore. In this podcast I talk with Robert Half's Senior Manager, Kevin Jarvis to shed some light on this important management task.

Kevin Jarvis, why should employers spend time checking references?

Kevin: Stuart, there's obviously some very good reasoning for checking references and that is making sure that the candidate is what you think they are. We need to be making sure that in whatever we learn about a candidate through the course of an interview is actually verified by the people who have witnessed their technical and soft skills in the environment that they've worked in. If we don't do that then we're not really getting a true understanding as to the capability of the candidate. Also I think it's very easy, especially you know I speak from a salesperson perspective, when I interview somebody for my team I tend to like to buy from people quite quickly and it's quite easy to get bought in to people who interview well but the reality of how they perform in the role, day-to-day may not be the same as what you perceive from just meeting with them in the interview situation. Most importantly we have to be cautious that you have done the right background checks and compliance to make sure that there's no legal issues, you know defrauding or anything like that of somebody's previous employer in their history. It's highly unlikely but we've been around in business long enough at Robert Half to know that it can happen. So it's extremely important to make sure that you cover your bases with those issues.

In addition, references should not be an arduous process, they should be ones where it's easy to contact the referee, if they're not available they call back quickly because they're keen to help their candidate, the information flows during the reference easily, and it verifies the feelings that the hiring manager has about that candidate having interviewed them. If none of those things are happening then questions should be asked. With the best candidates who are really appropriate for jobs, all of that flows very easily with references and there shouldn't be any obstacles to achieving it quickly and therefore getting the candidate across the line.

Stuart: Can we rely on the references that most employers provide and take them at their word?

Kevin: By in large, Stuart, I think we can. Here, certainly in Australia and in the Asian regions, we find that clients are fairly open in giving words and an honest level of feedback about candidates. I guess it comes down, significantly, to how well you probe that referee when you're talking to them. If you don't pick up on some of the things that perhaps are not said or really listen actively to what they're saying to you to be able to pick up on other lines of questioning that you can take with that referee, then you may be missing out on some pretty important content and not getting the most out of the reference. In addition, I guess you have to make sure that you're talking to the right contact in the first place. You want to be making sure that the candidate is directing you to their old boss and that you are verifying that that actually is the case.

Stuart: Many hiring managers see reference checking as an administrative HR task. Do you agree, and if not, what benefits do line managers get from conducting the reference themselves?

Kevin: Absolutely disagree. I believe, Stuart, that it should be by the hiring manager that does the reference checking, without any shadow of a doubt. Hiring managers know the candidate probably better than the HR person because they've spent more time with them through the interview process and the recruitment process, potentially over the phone, in-between interview stages, as well as face-to-face. And it's therefore that hiring manager that's going to be able to pick up on certain things that get said in the reference and potentially pursue them more closely than perhaps the HR person would be able to. Secondly the hiring manager should be more technical and therefore able to pick up on you know technical deficiencies or perhaps strengths that that person has through the reference checking process and can therefore dot the 'i's and cross the 't's on that. In addition to that, information that you get in the reference may actually lead you to a better understanding as to how to manage that person once they come in the door so that you can get them up to speed quickly and learn how to integrate them to the team as well as you can in a short space of time and therefore get the team working well

Stuart: Recently there have been some well publicised cases of employers using sites like Facebook and Twitter to unearth what current and potential employees get up to in their personal lives, what are your thoughts on using social networks to perform reference checks and do you have any advice for employers who might be thinking of doing this?

Kevin: A very interesting question, Stuart, and I've done a little bit of research and found that it's actually, according to the Privacy Act, it's illegal to use such information to make an assessment of a candidate's suitability as an employee. Personally speaking, as a hiring manager, I don't really see how you know people's views online of someone's social contacts is really going to affect their ability to come and work for me or you know that a potential employer of me could feel the same in the other context. So I would encourage employers not to consider looking at such sites because the materials there may be wholly inaccurate on many occasions and you could get a lot better knowledge and understanding of the candidate's suitability to a job and the environments that you're looking to recruit them into by talking directly to a human being.

Stuart: Can you rely on the references provided by candidates and who should you contact to get the most reliable references?

Kevin: One should hope, Stuart, that you should be able to rely on the reference contacts that the contact gives to you but that should be a standard part of your reference checking process, that you confirm that the person is who the candidate said

they would be, i.e. they were their boss for the period of employment or the part of it that they suggested they were, and that should be verified, if necessary, by calling the switchboard to confirm a contact's position within the organisation from an independent person. If that is not the case then obviously you need to double that with the candidate and find out why, you know why that's happened. Another option with candidates is also to get peer and subordinate references. If you're recruiting somebody into a management position, you may wish to ask them for references of people that worked for them so that you can verify their management style, ability in how they handle challenges of that nature, in addition, for senior level roles, I would encourage people to take peer references.

So identify who those people were and speak to them and obviously it's going to be a slightly different line of questioning that you might want to take because you're not verifying exactly how they performed in the job, more how they interacted across the group that they were in.

Stuart: What happens if you find that a candidate has been fraudulent or utterly misleading in their resume?

Kevin: If someone's been misleading in their resume I guess you need to be doubling back with the candidate to find out why. If I found it in somebody that I was trying to hire, I would be seriously concerned. Overall we should be expecting to get from the reference exactly what we see on the interview, or see in the CV, sorry, and then what we hear in the interview and learn about the candidate. If people are defrauding and misleading in their CVs, it's a concern about their lack of genuine approach to the whole process.

Stuart: Practically speaking, what kinds of questions do you recommend asking in a reference check?

Kevin: One of the first questions I'd be asking Stuart, is to ask the referee to confirm all the duties that they observed this person to perform during their period of employment and to compare those very closely with what's written on the resume. If necessary actually go through the resume with them to prompt them. Sometimes they may not remember all the things that that person did so we actually tend to, as recruiters, go through line by line what the duties were and what the achievements were of the person in a position. Secondly, we want to probe into how they performed in terms of those duties. So, you know, what were their areas of strength in actually delivering against those duties and how did they go about achieving their goals that they listed in the CV and the resume. And I guess it's a case of peeling back the layers, you know like an onion, trying to really probe deeper and deeper into why they felt they were good in certain areas and perhaps not so good in others. Often if you leave a nice pause it can give the person time to really think about what else this person did. They don't necessarily have it at the forefront of their mind when you first ask them the question and some probing and good pauses during that questioning can lead to some really good information.

Specifically you may also want to ask how they got on with their peers, managers and clients. I would certainly encourage people to always ask the question would they re-employ, hypothetically, given the right position. And obviously there's the softer side to the employment fit, it's not just what the person did and how they did it, but also you know what were their personality strengths and weaknesses, how would, you know what could be their opportunities for improvement. We also like to ask where they may have

failed to meet expectations and that can lead to some interesting, you know some interesting answers which may or may not be relevant to the job that they're going to do moving forward. How someone coped under pressure can be a good one too, depending obviously on the job but there's pressure in most jobs these days and we need to know how people are going to react when they come against it.

Stuart: Even though those questions may seem straight forward to you, what do you do when referees aren't willing to answer or are unhelpful?

Kevin: In my experience, Stuart, when that happens there's normally a reason and it's I guess good to just be direct and ask the referee, you know, do you mind me asking you know, referees are normally more forthcoming with information and you know is there a reason why you're not being so in this instance. If necessary and if you think it's just because they're not doing a good job of being a referee then you may want to, you know, imply that it could affect this candidate's future job prospects with your organisation. And perhaps to understand the consistency of them as a referee, you might just ask them if they'd be different with other employees. More importantly, though, you should have alarm bells ringing if this is the case because the employee perhaps should have primed this reference, or referee I should say, and got them ready for answering the questions, not in terms of actually you know listing their answers, but certainly letting him know that the reference is coming, they'd appreciate the assistance.

Stuart: How do you handle a situation where somebody may be very senior and employed in the same company for a long time and it's sensitive to the candidate? In other words they don't want their current employer to know that they're applying for another job, what do you do in that situation?

Kevin: Quite often if they've been there a long time Stuart, someone that they reported to will have left, you know, in the past and that person could have been their boss or certainly more senior to them and they could be a referee of sorts before you get to the point of the job offer. Once you've got the job offer from, once you're making an offer to a candidate, it can always be subject to references, and obviously you want to double back and take the reference once you've had the acceptance with the person who at the moment you can't talk to. That is something that you should never, ever forget. Make sure you dot the 'I's and cross the 'T's with that one because that's going to be, you know, a very important one.

Stuart: What kind of information would you try to clear up in a reference check that you wouldn't necessarily know from a CV or an interview with the candidate?

Kevin: There's a few things that you can try and clear up that you know people's self awareness mean, Stuart, that during the interview process they may give a view on their performance or their abilities in certain ways which is quite different to what you, what is actually the case, and secondly what the referee might say and also what the CV might suggest. So firstly the reason for leaving, we don't necessarily know that what the person said in the interview is correct, we need to confirm that. Always make sure that there's months accounted for on a CV. If someone puts years, you know 2006 to 2008, that's, there's 12 months in each of those beginning and end years, and we want to know that there's no gaps that the candidate's perhaps hiding. The cultural and environmental factors in which the candidate has performed do not necessarily come out throughout the interview, or certainly might come out with some level of bias. So it's good to try and confirm that with a referee. What management style would suit the candidate best, that's one which a difficult candidate, a difficult question for the

candidate to answer themselves, but very easy often for the employer to answer for you and can give you, as we said, more understanding as to how better manage them in the future. How they react under pressure, some applicants may perceive their ability under pressure to be quite different from the reality. So certainly one that would be good to be focusing on.

Stuart: Thinking about candidates for a moment, do you have any advice for them when putting together their list of references?

Kevin: Absolutely Stuart, you should be beginning with the end in mind. When you start the job, when you're in it day-to-day, week-to-week, and year-to-year, you should be thinking about when you finish this job, what's my referee going to say to me, or say about me. That's extremely important and that's the biggest thing that's going to determine how good your reference is and therefore whether or not you perhaps get on in your career to the next opportunity. So begin with the end in mind is the first thing. Secondly, prime your referees before anybody calls them. So obviously you ask their permission before you leave, but you may also want to put a call in to them before the hiring manager is going to call, actually let them know to expect the person's call and their name, et cetera. And then subsequent to the reference being given actually call them or drop them an email or maybe a thank you card to say you know thanks for your efforts in passing on the information to the new hiring manager. You never know when you might need those people again so showing gratitude is going to go a long way.

Stuart: Finally, Kevin, can you share some of the mysteries you've cleared up, or hiring mistakes you've prevented, with thorough reference checks?

Kevin: I do have a bit of a war story actually Stuart. I remember a couple of years ago I had hired somebody recently on my team to work for me and I was training them up and I invited them to sit in on interview with me. It was with a very good project manager whose CV I was impressed by and I interviewed them, did a full interview for 45-60 minutes, walked out and said to my trainee, I said I think they're a really good candidate and I'm, you know, I'm really looking forward to working with them. I'm going to try and leverage my networks proactively to try and help them find something I think but before I do let's just do the normal thing, we'll take a reference or two just to make sure that what I feel is actually the case. As it turned out, when I'd asked the candidate in the interview did you report to these references or referees directly, it's turned out not to be the case. He said that it was but when I called them, they denied this and I just probed a little bit and uncovered quite quickly that he was misleading with who they were and their ability to give a good view on his performance whilst working with those companies. And it happened on more than one occasion. So there was I thinking I had a great candidate that I could take to my clients and the reality was I could never use this guy again. Having interviewed people for over a dozen years, it shows that you know even I am not fail safe, we can make mistakes and we've got to make sure that we keep checking the references to cover our bases.

Stuart: Kevin Jarvis, thanks very much for your time today.

Kevin: Pleasure.

Stuart: Thank you for listening to the Robert Half podcast series. For more information on global employment opportunities and career advice, visit www.roberthalf.net.

End of Interview