



Guidelines for Conducting and Providing Reference Checks: Academic Professionals and Civil Service Employees

Overview

The University of Illinois System requires references to be checked for every recruiting effort, regardless of whether the final candidate is an external applicant or internal university employee. Conducting a reference check is a critical part of the recruitment process, and a job offer should never be extended without checking the finalist's references. Conducting reference checks will help your unit make better hiring decisions as it provides a general understanding of how the candidate performed in past jobs. Reference checks can help protect the significant investment a hiring department makes in any new hire by ensuring better job matches. Hiring without conducting a reference check could lead to institutional liability for negligent hiring if the employee's past performance, dangerous characteristics, or actions, are deemed to pose a risk.

General Guidelines

References shall be checked for the final candidate(s) the unit wants to extend an offer for regular full-time and part-time Academic Professional and Civil Service positions. The reference check should occur regardless of whether the final candidate is an external applicant or internal University of Illinois employee. The responsible party for checking the references may vary between universities and the system office but is often the search committee, hiring unit, or human resources office.

Consent for Reference Checks

The application for employment includes a candidate's written authorization that serves as consent. Additionally, the list of references provided by the candidate is also considered consent. Prior to contacting the references, the individual or office checking the references shall inform the candidate that references will be checked. This is especially important when contacting the finalist's current employer and references as it may impact their current position.

If the finalist does not provide a reference from their current employer or the hiring authority would like a reference from someone not on the finalist's list, an "off-list reference consent form" shall be given to the finalist for their signature. If the finalist objects to completing the "off-list consent form", the hiring authority shall inform the finalist that their decision will be respected; however it may affect the University of Illinois' ability to fully evaluate their employment suitability.

Number of Reference Checks

The recommended number of references to contact is a minimum of two, preferably three, for each finalist. References may be provided in several forms, including letters of recommendation, references to contact by phone, or via an electronic format (i.e. email or online survey). If the either of the two references provide negative or conflicting information, more references should be contacted. Ideally, the list of references should include professional references from current and/or past employers.

Performing Reference Checks

All reference checks, whether for an external or internal candidate, should be conducted with the following guidelines in mind:

- Be consistent within your search. Conduct reference checks at the same time for all candidates. Ideally, this will occur after finalist(s) are selected. If it occurs earlier in the search process, all candidates should be checked at the same time.
- Begin your reference process by thoroughly reviewing information obtained in the application materials submitted by the job applicant and identify the people you wish to contact.
- It is recommended that at least one of the references be via phone. Talking to a reference directly will help you have a better understanding of the candidate and will allow you to ask follow up questions based on responses.
- Ask the applicant to provide reference information if it is missing from the application including name, title, phone number and email address contacts.
- Ask the applicant to ensure references are professional and not personal. References from relatives should be avoided.
- Inform the finalist that reference checks will be conducted.
- Ask the candidate to complete the “off-list reference consent form” if necessary.
- As a general rule, it is beneficial to speak directly to the applicant’s immediate supervisor when seeking employment references. If the immediate supervisor is not provided as a reference, receive consent from the applicant before making contact with that supervisor.
- References should support information supplied on the application, resume, and as stated during the finalist’s interview.
- If conducting phone reference checks, contact each of the references via email to schedule a mutually acceptable time to conduct the reference check. Allow for 30 minutes for the call, even though you may only need 15 – 20 minutes.
- When introducing yourself to the employer, do not say that the finalist has “been selected”, only that they are a finalist for a position.
- If you believe the employer is hesitant to provide information over the telephone, offer to have them call you back so that the person providing the reference can verify who you say you are. This will also allow the employer time to refresh their memory on the individual you are inquiring about.
- Only request information that is relevant to the finalist’s skills and qualifications in relation to the vacancy.
- Disregard information where the provider does not have first-hand knowledge or it is unrelated to the individual’s skills or performance.

- Protect the confidentiality of the recruiting process and the privacy of your finalists whenever possible. Treat names of individuals involved in the recruitment, salaries, and personal information as confidential.
- Use caution when evaluating comments that are “off the record”.
- Do not ask any questions that are prohibited under anti-discriminatory laws, such as questions regarding gender, race, color, national origin, age, disability, religion, etc.
- Keep reference check documentation for the required length of time under the [Human Resources Records Retention Schedule](#) provided by The Office of Records and Information Management Services (RIMS).
- Maintain the highest level of confidentiality throughout the process. Do not delegate the reference gathering process to anyone outside the hiring process and share information gathered on a need to know basis only.

Questions to Ask During a Reference Check

Refer to the “University of Illinois Reference Checking Questions” template for recommended questions to ask during the reference checking process.

Providing References

If a prospective employer seeks to validate the job performance and qualifications of a former or current University of Illinois employee prior to hiring, a reference may be provided as long as certain guidelines are adhered to:

- If the request is for employment verification only (and not a reference), direct the employer to the [Employment Verification System process](#).
- The reference giver must include factual and non-confidential information that may be material to the applicant’s fitness for employment. If sufficient knowledge is not known about a current or former employee’s job performance, the requester must be told the nature of the relationship with the employee and that a meaningful reference cannot be given.
- If an objective and/or positive reference for any reason cannot be given, then the request should be declined and forwarded to university or system human resources for a response.
- Information about administrative grievances, settlement agreements, Worker’s Compensation claim, an employee’s medical records or disabilities should not be given during a reference check. This is confidential information and violates the former or current employee’s privacy.
- Documents from any source (department, Human Resources, unit, etc.) cannot be released to current or former employees, prospective employers of current or former employees, governmental agencies, or other organizations such as a financial or lending institution without a written release from the employee.

Questions May Be Directed To:

Chicago	UIC Human Resources Cheri Canfield, cheric@uillinois.edu , (312) 996-4852
Springfield	Academic Affairs Division Carlene Hindert, chind2@uis.edu , (217) 206-6652 Finance & Administration, Advancement, and Chancellor Divisions Madison Stone, mston3@uis.edu , (217) 206-6652 Student Affairs Division Amy Cantrall, acant4@uis.edu , (217) 206-6652
Urbana	Illinois Human Resources Deb Stone, debstone@illinois.edu , (217) 333-3101
System Office	System Human Resource Services Angela Foster, anfoster@uillinois.edu , (217) 333-7671