

Using Professional References to Your Advantage

Prospective employers want more than your word alone that you are a reliable great contributor. Strong professional references are a key component of your job search.

Use your favorable reputation to your advantage—choose your professional references wisely. Choose references that will help, not hinder, your job search. Hiring managers do eliminate candidates because of a poor reference—so it's important to be selective.

What Is a Professional Reference?

A professional reference is someone who can vouch for your qualifications for a job—typically, a former employer, supervisor, colleague, teacher, or client. Focus on individuals who have insight into your expertise, work ethic, work style, skills, strengths, and achievements.

Ideally, your choices will cover a variety of your skills.

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NOTE: A professional reference is not the same as a personal reference. A personal reference focuses on personal traits instead of work-related qualifications and industry-relevant skills. Make sure you're clear as to which type of reference is sought.

Let's get started with this step-by-step guide:

1. Whom should I select?

The best references are people who:

- Worked with you directly
- Worked with you recently
- Know your strengths
- Will advocate for you

Don't squander the opportunity to receive a stellar endorsement by listing references that can only provide vague examples of your work. Weak references can be just as damaging as negative ones, leaving the hiring manager to wonder why you would include someone who can't speak definitively about your experiences and abilities. After all, if one of the few people you chose to advocate for your strengths cannot come up with a compelling story, they may think twice about your ability to make an impact.

2. When compiling your list of professional references, ask yourself these questions:

- **What was the quality of our working relationship?**
- **How recently did we work together?**

A word of caution: if you can, avoid listing your current supervisor as a reference (unless you're sure he or she will not be concerned that you're leaving). You don't want to jeopardize your current job while you look for a new one.

- **Which of my strengths do they know?**
- **Will they advocate for me?**

3. How to Ask Someone to Be Your Reference