UNIVERSITIES OF WISCONSIN

SYS 1275 Appendix 2

Reference Check Guidelines

Conducting a reference check to obtain information about past performance from supervisors, peers, or other references, is an essential step in the recruitment process. This information assists in the selection process by providing insight into the candidate's strengths and developmental needs, which can also be beneficial during the onboarding process. 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.

Checking multiple references demonstrates that reasonable care was used in the hiring process. Information obtained from references is useful in evaluating a candidate's skills, training, experience, and ability to perform position duties. Obtaining multiple references allows supervisors to look for consistency among references.

The UW System uses an automated reference checking process, in which the system sends e-mailed reference check requests to previous employers and other references identified by the candidate. Best practice for obtaining references is to have a minimum of 3 reference responses (one of which is a supervisor), and to request 5 references from finalists for use within the reference checking software. Institutions should make every effort to receive 3 reference responses. It is not required that the supervisory reference be a current supervisor.

In almost all cases, only professional references are requested; these include former or current supervisors, co-workers, clients/customers, or anyone who has worked directly and most recently with the applicant, who can comment on the applicant's performance. For new graduates, teachers or professors who have observed their work on a project or internship, a volunteer program leader who has observed performance, or other similar people familiar with the candidate may be used.

If obtaining 3 references is not possible, the institution may elect to still proceed with the hire, considering factors such as the level and permanence of the position, level of direct supervision under which the employee will work, and other relevant criteria. It is never appropriate to waive references on an external hire for a position of trust. If a finalist is hired in these circumstances, the institution must document the reasons for the decision within the recruitment file.

If necessary, hiring administrators, supervisors or HR staff may contact the HR department of previously listed employers to solicit contact information for the applicant's current and previous supervisors.

UW institutions may elect to exclude certain employee groups from the use of the automated reference checking software. In these limited circumstances, a reference of another type should be substituted (i.e., phone), and information obtained from the reference must be documented in the recruitment file. An email summarizing a phone conversation by the staff person making the reference check would be an acceptable example of reference documentation. Notes taken and stored in the recruitment file about the candidate should be factual and objective.

The most common and recommended time for conducting a reference check is after the final interview process for the top candidate(s). It can also be done earlier to help determine the interview pool or to prepare for the interviews. It is important to inform candidates that you are contacting their references prior to starting any reference checks. To help expedite responses from the references, ask the candidate to reach out and inform their references that the checks are beginning and to be prepared to respond to requests.