

To embellish or not to embellish? Major corporations will contact universities directly. . .

Credentials & References A Key Employment Strategy

By Diane Hudson Burns

Many clients tell me during the course of a resume preparation interview that they will provide certified copies of their transcripts or other proof of education, licenses, or employment. I tell them that it is not necessary to provide me with proof -- they do not have to prove anything to me. But, I strongly indicate that they will have to prove their degrees and other licenses to a hiring authority.

Every now and then, I will get a call the next day from a client who says, "You know that master's degree from Stanford I told you about; remove it." (Oh really, I think.) Then I ask, "What about the undergraduate degree?" "Remove it too," is the response.

To embellish or not to embellish? That is the question.

Major corporations will contact universities directly and receive verification of degrees, certifications, and/or other licenses. Some companies require certified copies or sealed transcripts.

The hiring personnel department will contact other record departments from former employers via form mail to verify prior employment dates and salary history. Most companies impose a probation period in order for all the appropriate background checks to be completed and to assess the basic performance on the part of the newly hired employee. Discrepancies will be brought to the attention of employee relations or other applicable departments.

A recruiter screens out simple discrepancies by comparing the resume, application, and other submitted documentation, i.e., military documents or uncertified transcripts. It is important that dates and companies listed on a resume match an application, that degrees are legitimate, and references are contactable.

Drug Testing

Many companies require physical examinations and drug testing, a check of references, a security clearance check (if applicable) and salary verification for the most recent employer. Some clients receive base salary in addition to housing, cost of living, medical, and other special allowances. I remind them to only list the base salary for verification. Then they can indicate additional benefits/allowances during salary negotiations, as a requirement to maintain their current lifestyle. But the salary verification will only indicate base salary.

Developing References

One of the purposes of checking references is to develop references. If a hiring authority is speaking to a listed reference, most likely they will ask the reference if he knows someone else that he could talk to who would also know the candidate. Now, the recruiter has developed a reference. Or, many hiring authorities will ask candidates during the interview who they could contact to verify employment history or serve as a reference. Often times, the candidate names a person different from references listed on the application. The recruiter may elicit completely different information from a developed reference than from a listed reference. Personnel offices attempt to corroborate such information as job duties, discipline problems, quality of work performance, dates of employment, work habits, attendance/reliability, ability to deal with people, reason for leaving, most recent salary, and eligibility for rehire -- usually on a form letter sent to previous employers. And if the applicant is applying for a security clearance the questions continue with drug/alcohol use or abuse, financial problems or unexplained affluence, lifestyle habits, criminal convictions, security violations, patriotism, and loyalty.

I once developed a reference for a candidate applying for a senior level position requiring work with sensitive programs. The developed reference confirmed the attempt on the candidate's part to sell company information. The candidate was fired from a different division and was applying to my division under an alias. Once I corroborated the information with the personnel records office, it was determined that, indeed, this individual was considered a traitor within the company. He was no longer in the running for the position.

Background checks are not arbitrary. It is required that negative responses be double-checked and corroborated. One negative response could possibly come from a disgruntled former employer solely to discredit the applicant.

References

References are very important. Resume clients need to be reminded that full names and complete addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses are required for a reference sheet. Many just provide a name with only a phone number or an address (or sometimes they provide incomplete addresses). Some companies send out fill-in-the-blank type questionnaires to verify references; others contact the reference by phone. Some use both methods. Nevertheless it is important for a candidate to list both methods of contact. Candidates who move frequently, career change often, or serve in the military sometimes have difficulty retaining references.

I advise clients to maintain at least five solid employment references by using permanent addresses at stateside locations. Even if the hiring authority requests only three references, there is a pool of five to choose from, especially if one is no longer contactable. I recommend that the client send a postcard to the reference's permanent address each time she moves. She needs to request that the reference do the same. Use of email has made the job of maintaining references easier, except when a reference moves to a foreign country (they often have to change servers and addresses).

Letters of Reference

I encourage all clients to receive written letters of reference whenever they leave any position, for their files, and to use as proof in a situation where a reference

moves on and is no longer attainable. Many companies do not accept prewritten letters of reference, because there is no proof to its validity. Others request letters of reference. Still, I encourage clients to save letters of reference and even carry them in the back of a portfolio to an interview session. Of course, I encourage my clients to carry extra resumes and a reference list to the interview. Sometimes the employment process is slowed because a candidate does not have his reference list available at the time of the interview.

References should be able to provide detailed information about a candidates' work history, standard of performance, and reliability. For security clearances, references are checked up to 10 years and more. Candidates should have at least one reference who has known them for many years and can confirm their employment background. Solid references include supervisors, colleagues, college professors, internship managers, or volunteer organization leaders. In a case where the most recent supervisor is likely to provide a poor reference, then I suggest selecting another supervisor in the same or different department. Even if the most recent position was volunteer, a solid reference can be offered to the candidate's reliability, interpersonal skills, work habits, attitude, and motivation.

I advise clients to contact potential references and get their permission. Some may prefer to be contacted at home during certain hours or during the workday. Being a reference should not be a burden. Selecting references is a crucial part of obtaining employment. I offer clients the service of preparing their reference list on matching letterhead and stationery that I developed for their resume.

If a reference check goes bad, the hiring authority may not tell the candidate why he was not selected for a position. So, after I explain all this to my clients, they usually choose not to embellish credentials or qualifications on their resume.