



Less Struggle. More Support. Better Results.

Reference List - Best Practice Format

One of the tools you still need in your “job search toolbox” is a reference list. It may have fallen out of favor in recent years, but like most things, you’re better off being prepared in case you are asked for it.

A reference list is simply a list of people a potential employer can call to ask questions about you. Everyone knows that no one on your list will (or should) say something negative about you, but it’s a formality many employers have to go through.

Personal or Professional?

Some people are still confused about whether references are ‘personal’ or ‘professional’. You should only provide professional references, unless you are specifically asked for personal ones. The only time it is OK to provide personal references is when you are looking for your very first job and you don’t have a choice. Though, even in that situation, you likely have volunteer, community service and school references you can provide.

Typically, a potential employer does not want to talk to someone who has been your ‘friend’ for 20 years who has never worked with you. You may have been friends at work with your professional reference, that’s OK, as long as they can speak to what you did at work and how well you did it.

Who to Include

The best reference list is one that provides a variety of people you worked with. Include first those folks who you worked for: supervisors, managers or department leads/leaders. They are the most in tune with how you worked and the value you provided. The higher up the organization the better, but just make sure they really know you and can provide concrete details when asked specific questions about you.

Note: References who were your superiors and who still work for the company you worked at with them may tell you it is against company policy to be a reference for you. If they really, really liked you they might be willing to break company policy for you. If you had that kind of relationship with them, it’s worth asking. If they are no longer with the company you worked at together, they are no longer bound by the company’s policy not to be a reference.

Next, have some references that were peers of yours – people who were at the same level. They should also know what you did and be able to describe it. You can also include references who were your customer, either internally or externally to an organization. They should be able to speak to what you provided.

Also, consider having references who worked for you – people you supervised, managed or led. This is especially important if you are interviewing for a supervisory, managerial or leadership position.

Finally, don't forget that professional references can also include people you did volunteer work with or for. The skills you gained in those activities are very real and important. These references are especially important if you have been out of the workforce for a while.

How Many References?

First, keep a master list of references - maybe 10 or so. You won't ever give your master list to a potential employer, but keep a master list so you can pull references from your master list to create a list that is tailored to the position you're applying for.

If you have worked in different industries at different levels, you want to provide a potential employer with the best 3 – 5 references that match their industry and references who will be the best fit for the particular position you're applying for. Keep your master list up to date with the information as outlined below.

I suggest having 3 to 5 references on your list that you would give to a potential employer. Many times people who are checking your references will only make one attempt at contacting your list. So if you have 4 or 5 and they reach 2 or 3, they're satisfied with that. Also, try to spread out the references on your tailored list based on the categories discussed above, i.e. 1 manager, 1 peer/co-worker, 1 customer, 1 subordinate and maybe 1 volunteer activity reference.

Information to Provide

Here's my recommendation for what information to keep on each of your references and to provide on your list:

- Full name: first and last
- Current City and State they reside or work in
- Current email address
- Phone number(s) – work and/or cell
- Company they currently work for and their current title
- Company you worked with them at and
 - Their title at the time
 - Dates you worked with them

How Far Back Should You Go?

Different employers and references will have differing opinions about how far back in your history references should be, i.e. should you include someone you worked with 10, 15 or 20 years ago? It depends, but you are better off sticking to your more recent experience.

If it's been awhile since you worked or you are re-entering the workforce, obviously your most recent references may be 5 or 10 years old. If that's the case, use who you have, as your resume work history will explain the dates of your references.

Keep in Touch and Ask Permission!

Here's the most important section of this article: keep in touch with your references and ask permission! You need to keep in touch with each of them so you always have their current information: email, phone numbers, current employer and title. Also, ask them how they prefer to be contacted. Some may prefer work emails and phone numbers and others may prefer their personal email address and their cell phone.

Next, always make sure you have their permission to have them on your reference list. You never want to have a reference contacted on your behalf by a potential employer and have your reference be caught off guard.

Continue to ask their permission on a periodic basis. A reference may have agreed to be on your reference list during your last job search, but may not agree to it now. Different people have different rules around how long they feel comfortable vouching for you. If it's been 10 years since you worked with them, they may feel they are no longer in a good position to be a reference for you.

Finally, it is a good practice to call your references when you have submitted them to a potential employer on your behalf. Since they may be contacted by a potential employer, you want to give them a 'heads up' so they won't ignore the phone call and/or email.

List Format

All of your written documents and correspondence should be similarly formatted, including your reference list. In other words, your contact information at the top of your resume, cover letter and reference list should all be the same, except on your Reference List you'll add 'References For:' on the first line before your contact information. I recommend the following format along with whatever color and graphic you're using on your resume and cover letters:

References For:

Your First Name and Last Name

Your Full Address
Your Phone Number
Your Email Address

Then, skip 3 lines and start your reference list based on the format in the 'Information to Provide' section.

Keep it all on one page. Also, save your document as a separate file, and name it: *References Company Name Job Title Date* where you have a unique company name, job title and date for each file.

When to Provide and Use Your Reference List

Only provide your reference list when you are asked for it. Do not ever include it with your cover letter or resume, unless it is specifically requested. Also, do not add to the bottom of your resume 'References Available Upon Request'. It is assumed you have a reference list and typically a potential employer will only ask for it if you are a finalist or they are planning on offering you a position. Always bring a few copies of your list to an interview, but do not offer it unless asked for it.

To your success!



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