

Backdoor References in Recruitment: Insight or Invasion?

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This Intelligence Can Be Helpful When Preparing to Make an Offer, But it Can Also Land You in Hot Water.

It can be difficult to assess candidates for a role, especially if you don't know them from a previous job. Some people interview well and some don't. But either way you can't always assess their work quality from just a Zoom or in-person meeting, plus their resume. That's where references come in. Delving more deeply by asking questions of people who have seen them in action, understand their skill set, and can share a more nuanced view can shed helpful insight.

The thing about references, though, is that the candidate typically provides them. These are hand-selected to show one side of a candidate. People usually don't agree to provide a reference if they are going to say negative things about the person. The information you

glean from these calls is therefore biased. There is a way, though, to get additional viewpoints. Perhaps a past colleague worked with them at a previous job, or a friend of friend knows them.

These backdoor references involve consulting people outside the candidates' formal list. They're usually checked without the candidates' knowledge, though the hiring side may ask permission before doing so.

"They're probably used half the time," says Eric Celidonio, founder and managing partner of Sci.Bio Recruiting. He cautions that when over-relying on informal networks and a person's circle of trust, "we may not get the most pertinent information." And there are other concerns, too.

When to use a backdoor reference

Most commonly, references are checked when preparing to make an offer. But that's not the only time. Alicia Rio, PhD uses them early in the hiring process to screen interesting applicants. Rio (not her real name) is a director-level scientist and hiring manager at a pharmaceutical company. "I'm likely to use backdoor references when I first get a resume and it looks interesting and I want to learn more," she says. She also wants to know whether the candidate is worth pursuing or if there are any red flags. "If I haven't done any intelligence before talking with the candidate, I might check a backdoor reference after a phone screen, before moving to a full-blown on-site interview."

According to Celidonio, these references are most important when it's vital to hire the right person for a role or the candidate's approved references are inadequate—like when their reference list does not contain direct or indirect supervisors. "Backdoor references can be a means of validation," he says.

Benefits of backdoor references

When using a backdoor reference, it's important to consider whether the individual providing the reference is credible as well as how they know the candidate. Do they have direct insight into the candidate's role, could they have a hidden agenda, and is the information shared first-hand or hearsay?

Wiseman says he looks for recurring themes from a backdoor reference to help support or disprove their independent assessment of that candidate. "In most scenarios, formal references are likely to be positive," he says. When used appropriately, backdoor references can offer a more balanced assessment, giving the hiring manager peace of mind with additional data points.

When Rio talks with backdoor references, she looks to uncover the candidates' intangible soft skills that don't come through on a resume: Are they a team player? How do they deal with conflict? Are they a hard worker? Are they honest? "Those traits tend to be consistent from job to job and that's what you really want to get at when you're interviewing someone," she says.

All experts interviewed note that a backdoor reference should be considered alongside the total package, including formal references, interviews, and prior work experience. "You don't use the (backdoor reference) information as absolute yes or no. It adds some color to how you think of this candidate overall," Rio says.

Someone who looks good to the hiring team comes across positively from formal and informal references. Someone the hiring team views as borderline typically is also seen as borderline by the backdoor reference, she says.

Should a backdoor reference make or break the decision?

Formal references have a different weight and standard in recruiting. "If you receive negative feedback on that candidate, we're pretty much duty-bound to report that to the client," Wiseman says. When confronted with negative feedback through backdoor references, recruiters investigate to understand the context, talking with additional people to discern any patterns. On occasion, multiple references will confirm that the candidate has poor leadership skills, is a poor communicator, or something else pops up that negatively impacts the candidate. "And yes, it's resulted in our clients not wanting to move forward with that person," he says, though it's also saved the client from making a bad hire.

Rio has declined to move forward with a candidate late in the process, based partly on a backdoor reference who shared some red flags. She says, "we already had some doubts about the candidate," including the candidate not providing a reference from a direct supervisor, "but this cemented it in our heads." Occasional conflicts with supervisors are understandable, but giving no references from supervisors is problematic, which caused Rio to seek out informal references.

She has also been on the flip side, once asked by a graduate school peer to provide a backdoor reference for another former classmate. "She knew him tangentially and I knew him better. When asked directly if I would hire him, I said no. She was startled, but I knew my reputation was on the line," Rio says. The candidate did not receive an offer.

Usually, though, backdoor references strengthen the candidate, Wiseman says, especially when hiring at senior levels.

Don't step on these landmines

Confidentiality and trust are the table stakes. Never contact a candidate's current employer or anyone on the candidate's "do not contact" list, says Wiseman. "By doing so, you could directly put that candidate in a really difficult and irreversible position if the news spread, which in turn will impact the credibility of the recruiter and the firm by association," he says.

The majority of Stevenson's clients want backdoor references, Wiseman says. He prefers his firm conduct them, given there are so many reputations at stake, including those of the candidate, search firm, and client. "If there's any leakage, it reflects really badly on all parties," he says. Knowing the best way to conduct reference checks is the safest way to protect everyone, and that includes only reaching out to your trusted long-term contacts.

When Rio asks for a backdoor reference, she only does so from someone she highly trusts to keep the inquiry confidential.

Celidonio agrees this type of questioning can pose legal issues. He recommends sticking to questions like whether the person recommends hiring the candidate, rather than trying to get a lot of color about them. "Disparaging someone puts you and your company at risk," he says. Though these conversations may be off the record and anonymous, they can still be documented through note taking, calls recorded without all parties' knowledge, and screening notes reflecting a bad reference from a prior colleague. "It's ruined the careers of some people unfairly," Celidonio adds.

A candidate may get alarmed when they are well-qualified for a role but hear at the end of a positive hiring process that they're not a good fit—especially if it happens multiple times after reference checks. The candidate may track the problem back to a specific person. "It's a small world," Celidonio says, "and you could be implicated in slandering somebody. That is pretty serious."

To keep the process fair and legal, Wiseman tries to mirror the formal interview questions for backdoor references, so the line of questioning is always professional and specific to the client's needs. They never stray into personal questions like how the person feels about the candidate or whether they liked working with them.

Rio's questions for backdoor references include why a candidate left a previous position, whether they have the skills for the available role, if they got along with their boss, and if there were any red flags. "I wouldn't ask if they were pregnant, married, or if they would move," she says.

Experts note that these references should only be used to complement a rigorous interview process and formal interviews. Conducting interviews in an underhanded way and not letting the candidate know can be unfair to them.

Final thoughts

It's often in the candidate's best interest to provide direct manager references when possible, to make it less likely the hiring parties will look elsewhere for additional intelligence. Those conducting the reference checks should keep lines of questioning above board, and consider any potential conflicts of interest for informal references. If receiving negative views, look for repetition across sources—don't just rely on one person's comments.

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Deborah brings over two decades of professional writing experience, specializing in medical, health, and business, including insurance and supply chain. Prior to writing, she investigated medical malpractice claims for a doctor-owned insurance company and managed interactive voice response tools for healthcare clinical trials.