

Reference Checks are Important

Who can be a referee?

Potential volunteers should provide contact details of two referees who know them and can give some indication as to whether or not they are suitable. References might include close friends, a relative (no more than one), or a current or former employer. Good referees would be familiar with the applicants' involvement in similar roles with other organisations or related employment.

Plan your reference interview carefully. Refer to the volunteer outline and your checklist for characteristics of acceptable candidates. The following are essential to most roles:

- ❖ ability to work effectively in a team,
- ❖ ability to work with Guides and Leaders, and
- ❖ has a willingness to develop their skills knowledge and understanding

After the interview you may have identified some information or questions about their past or behaviour that you felt warranted confirmation or further pursuit. Decide what you really need to know about the applicant.

When you call the referee, be sure to introduce yourself as a representative of your organisation. Some people may be surprised by your call. Others may be nervous at first to give their opinion of someone they know.

Relax. Your comfort level will be communicated in your voice, and will help put the person at ease.

Tell the referee how long the call will take (about ten minutes) and describe the role the volunteer will have in your organisation. Be positive about the prospect of having them involved, and remember to keep questions relevant to the volunteer role. Here are some questions to consider:

- "How long, and in what capacity, have you known them? What is your current relationship with them?"
- "Can you picture them working with the Guides?"
- "Can you describe how they work as a member of a team?"
- "What strengths do you believe they have for this role?"
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Listen for the traits and behaviours that match those of a suitable volunteer

Ask open-ended questions that require more than just "yes" or "no." Keep asking clarifying questions until you understand the answers the referee is giving. Encourage both positive and negative feedback about the individual.

When calling former employers or organisations, ask whether they would hire or use this person's services again? If you get a negative or confusing response, feed it back or summarise the answer to probe further. Advise them that information will be kept as confidentially as possible, but that you may be required to release the information by law to the applicant or a law enforcement agency.

For the record

You should keep a written record of the telephone interview. Be as objective and as factual as possible when writing the information down. The responses you get from the two references together with your notes from the interview will provide the basis for your decision regarding suitability.

You are not looking for "perfect volunteers," but should be concerned about ensuring suitability and aptitude for a role. Most skills and knowledge can be taught, but attitudes are fairly fixed. What have you learned of the applicant's attitudes against the organisation's aims and objectives, her attitudes towards children? Discipline? Etc. Your final question should be the key question identified earlier: "Would you be willing to have this person work one-on-one with your child?" End the conversation by thanking the referee for their time.

As a recruiter, your job is vital to ensure new members are well matched to their roles.

Do's & Don'ts of reference Checks

Do's

- When you contact an applicant's personal references, remember that the applicant selected them for the positive impression he or she thought they would give. Nonetheless, take the task seriously. References sometimes reveal critical information about applicants.
- You should verify the nature of the relationship between the applicant and personal reference and the length of time they have known each other. You may be able to increase the objectivity of the information you receive from the referee if you stress the kinds of responsibilities that the applicant will have if selected for the position.

Don'ts

The most common reference-checking mistake is to miss an opportunity to get critical information from the applicant. Try to avoid the mistakes below.

- Asking leading questions. When you are checking references, let the referee provide the information. Instead of "Tom Jones told us that you and he have been friends for 10 years. Is that right?," you might want to ask, "How long have you and Tom Jones known each other?"
- Asking questions that can be answered by a simple yes or no. You need to phrase the questions so that the referee is required to think about their responses and to answer in their own words.
- Asking questions which are too general. Some information you need is very specific relative to the nature of the position and the risks you have identified.

Specific Questions to Ask

After verifying the factual information from the application (past activities, dates of paid or unpaid positions, position title, duties, etc.) there are some direct questions you should ask as the position involves working with children and handling Public money.

Working with Children

How would you describe her personal characteristics?
Probe for immaturity, shyness, introversion, non-assertiveness or indecision.

How would you say she relates with children?

Probe whether or not she relinquishes adult role and responsibility and is desperate to be liked, tends to become more like the child, places a premium on one-to-one activities rather than group activities.

I'd be interested in knowing if you think there may be any problems or conditions that would interfere with the applicant's ability to care for children or in any way endanger the children under the applicant's care.

While the reason for this question is obvious, the kinds of information you may receive are not. Listen not only to the words, but also to how the words are said - is there hesitancy/Equivocation?

Handling Money

[name of person] has applied for a position that requires handling Public money. Are you aware of any problems she may have that would cause you concern about entrusting her with this responsibility?

Listen for general concern about honesty and dependability. Ask for specific examples of problems so that you eliminate rumours and gossip.

This information was adapted from the information given at:-
<http://www.brightonhovevolunteers.org.uk/goodpractice/content.asp?filename=3x2x3>