

Wisconsin Park & Recreation Association

Career Center Tips: Do References Really Matter?



Tips for providing recommendations

The importance of references seems to be a hot topic these days. Park and Recreation employers want to make sure they are hiring the right person for the job; but some thwart the process because checking references can be labor intensive. On the other hand, job seekers provide references they know will give a glowing report; but employers are getting smarter and finding references you didn't provide.

So, what's the deal? Do references matter? Do employers even check them anymore? What's the protocol for providing them to a potential employer? Who are the best people to include as references? And, if an employer doesn't call any of your references, is it a bad sign?

While the definitive answer to any of these questions depends on the employer, overall, yes, references do still matter. The process has just changed.

References play a huge role in the hiring process, perhaps now more than ever. Often times hiring managers fall in love with a candidate on paper and then again in an interview, only to find out through a reference check that none of their previous employers would ever hire them again. By checking a candidate's references, hiring managers save themselves the frustration of hiring a person who is not a good fit for an organization. In this economy, where hiring budgets are slim, especially in the park and recreation industry, every hire must be a great fit.

Provided references are no guarantee

Though the majority of employers do check references, others skip this step. Not only is it labor intensive to check references for people who might not be poised for a job offer, many employers also worry about the risk of liability in rejecting a candidate based on poor references. Hiring decisions cannot be based on information that is discriminatory in nature, so to avoid any liability, the checks are often foregone.

Everyone wants to be helpful and supportive to former employees, but in the end, they offer little substance to a new employer. Legally, they are limited by what they can or want to say about former employees.

However, just because an employer isn't checking personal references the traditional way, doesn't mean they aren't checking references at all. Employers are more likely to check the informal, but tangible, behavioral reference sources like LinkedIn, Facebook, credit history or criminal history than the more subjective references provided by candidates. Candidates should be much more intentional about crafting a professional identity that serves the role of a reference but within the context of the work, profession and colleagues you seek to engage. It eliminates the weaknesses inherent in the old style of references that become so watered down they are useless.

Making the right choices

The last thing you want to do is give an employer useless references, but many job seekers make the mistake of not taking the time to thoughtfully choose the right people to speak on their behalf.

You want people who can speak to your role as a professional, not as a nice neighbor. Candidates can make their references count by prepping them to discuss their specific skills as they relate to the job and the impact they brought to the job, which can be just the differentiation needed in this highly competitive market.

When I receive a resume with references attached, I give them virtually no weight. They seldom are specific to the role the organization seeks and are not meaningful in considering qualifications or traits of successful candidate.

Finally, when it comes to protocol for submitting references, the process has changed as well. It used to be that applicants sent them in with their other

application materials, but now, you should wait to provide references until you are asked.

Most companies do not want your references until the end of the process and they will let you know when to provide a list of names and contact information. Do not send written references. These do not offer the highest impact as they are not specific on how you will fit in to the job you are pursuing. It is better to spend your time preparing your references for the kinds of questions they will be asked, and what they can do to help you close an offer.

Helpful hints

If you need more help on reference protocol, here are 10 tips to ensure you do everything right when it comes to providing references:

1. Include references only when requested by an employer.
2. Carefully consider whom to provide *after* discussion with the prospective employer. The time to check references is before an offer is made, but after the candidate is either the final candidate or among the final few for the job.
3. Seek references from people who actually know you and your work. Ask for permission to list them as a reference.
4. Ask directly if they can provide you with a positive reference for the position(s) you are seeking. If they hesitate then move on!
5. Prepare your references about who will be calling them and what to focus on when talking about you. Always ask them to call you after they have been called.
6. Prepare your references to speak consistently about your skills, but not identically. Suggest a different highlight for each person. Have 100 percent confidence in what they will say and how they speak about you, or cross them off the list.
7. Provide accurate contact information about your references, and ask your references how they prefer to be contacted (e-mail, phone, etc.).

8. Let your references know what happens to you and the position(s) you applied for. Say thank you to your references.

9. Prepare a LinkedIn site to demonstrate your skills and interests.

10. Participate in professional blogs to create a history of professional involvement in your field that is independent of your work history.