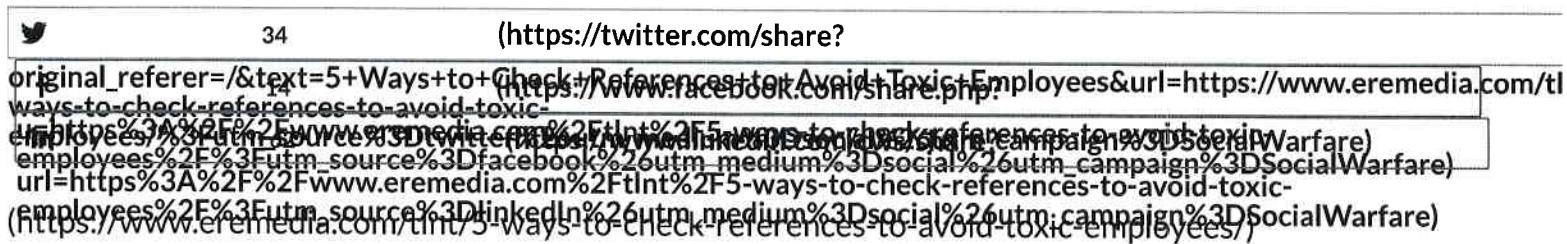


5 Ways To Check References To Avoid Toxic Employees



Have you ever attempted to check references before hiring, and run into a brick wall with the former employer giving you only name, title, and date of employment? If so, that's understandable because they fear lawsuits. On the other hand, the former employer may give a glowing reference. And only later you find out that the accolades don't ring true.

You discover that your newly hired employee is toxic to coworkers. His or her social skills are non-existent; being a "team player" is a foreign concept. This new employee has become a drain on productivity and puts a damper on morale.

It's far easier—and cheaper—to prevent the problem by non-selecting this applicant in the hiring stage.

To root out this kind of toxic employee at the early stage, I suggest this approach to reference-checking:

Step 1: Ask the applicant for references among several past supervisors, coworkers, and "other friends." (The idea behind asking for several is the applicant will find it time-consuming to inform and brief all thoroughly on what to say and what NOT to say in a conversation with you. You, of course, may not check with all, but a list of 3-4 in each category will likely serve your purpose of a candid conversation later.)

Step 2: Call one or two people from each of these categories (supervisors, coworkers, friends) to ask the reference-check questions below.

Step 3: Ask each of the references called in step 2 to give you another name to call to ask the same questions. (You'll need to modify the questions slightly by explaining, "I was talking with Joe Schmoie in regard to hiring Alberta Ditto, and Joe referred me to you, saying you might have a little more insight about Alberta since you two worked closely together. What would you say are ...")

Here are some key questions that tend to help you get an honest assessment of interpersonal skills and emotional stability:

Questions for a supervisor

- “What would you say are Geri’s top three strengths?” (Does the boss mention any attitude or interpersonal strengths?)
- “We don’t find many perfect employees out there. So we expect that Geri will need some coaching. In what areas would you say she could benefit from coaching?” (Does the boss mention interpersonal issues that you think are not correctable?)
- “Would you say Geri was highly popular with coworkers? Well liked? Or worked better alone? Just how would you describe their coworker relationships?” (If the boss uses the “loner” label, consider this a warning sign.)

Questions for a co-worker

- Geri has given your name, saying you worked together at XYZ. Exactly, how did your jobs relate? (Does this person’s story sync with what Geri has told you? Does this person seem eager or reluctant to talk?)
- Tell me about some of the key strengths Geri brings to a job.
- What did you appreciate most in working with Geri—her skills, her attitude, her personality? (Listen carefully to what this reference says—and doesn’t say. Probe with follow-up questions.)
- Would you please give me the name and number of someone else there who worked closely with Geri? (Call this second person and ask the same questions if you still have doubts about Geri.)

Questions for a friend

- Geri has applied for a job with our company and has given your name as a reference. Would you tell me how you two met? (Answers to this question and the following will simply reveal more about your applicant because people tend to choose for friends those who are like them, who share common interests, activities, and values.)
- How long have you known Geri?
- In what kinds of situations or activities have you seen Geri?
- What do you love about Geri?
- Does Geri ever do anything that annoys you? Do you two still stay in contact? Why not?
- Is there anything you wouldn’t trust her to handle for you as a friend?

(Of course, you will want to do other types of reference checks with supervisors to verify skills, with universities to verify academic credentials, with credit bureaus to verify financial integrity, and so forth.)

No doubt about it: This approach to reference-checking takes time. But then so does hiring, onboarding, and training a toxic employee who later has to be replaced.

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