

Strategic Sales Staffing - Reference Checks and Testing

In the previous article we completed our discussion of the process and tools needed to conduct an internal search and selection of new salespeople. That process includes reference checks and testing. This article will detail the importance and “best practices” of each.

Reference Checks

Most employers never do reference checks. Those that do, only check the references that the candidate provided. If you want an accurate picture of the candidate’s past, you must delve deeper and reach other contacts within the candidate’s prior organizations.

Thanks to our overly litigious society and the failure of our politicians to pass tort reform, employers are in a position where background checks are more and more difficult to obtain. Unfortunately, this has helped the weak remain hidden and has hamstrung business owners. Fortunately, if you are **persistent, make contact with the right people, ask the right questions,** and learn to **read between the lines,** you can still obtain valuable information.

A good tactic for obtaining information of any kind is to ask questions in an open (vs. directive) way and lead the person in the direction you wish to go. An open-ended question allows for a freer response. A directive question leads to a yes/no answer or a single word answer that yields little information. An example of an open-ended question would be “Please tell me about your experiences working with Joe” or “What can you tell me that would help me in working alongside Joe so that I can provide him the most help and support to increase his likelihood of success?” This type of probing sequence generally yields answers that point you to potential underlying issues without being overly aggressive.

Pay attention to the answers. Many times the reference will try to send you a message without crossing the lines of impropriety that could get them in trouble with HR. But, you have to be listening to pick up these cues!

A good tactic for getting to other contacts within the candidate’s prior organization is to ask each reference (in the course of your other questions) who else worked with the candidate. This way, you can build your network of information providers.

Another good tactic is to prepare specific questions for each candidate that address your concerns about their abilities relative to the position for which they are interviewing. For example, if one candidate appears overly confident, ask each reference, “Tell me about a time this candidate did not perform – how did he handle the situation?” Or “How does this candidate handle personal achievements? Is he the type to tell everyone or keep it to himself?” The main point here is creating questions tailored to potential concerns with every candidate. References can help reaffirm a belief or disprove a concern if others consistently answer one way or another.

The keys to reference checks are:

- Be persistent.
- Make contact with the right people.
- Ask the right questions in the right way.
- Read between the lines.

Testing

There is a lot of misinformation circling the Internet and HR communities with regard to testing. You are allowed to use testing in the selection of your candidates. It cannot be your sole criteria, but you can use it as a component. Not only can you use it, in my opinion, you must, especially in light of the difficulties surrounding reference checks!

There are many types of tests out there, too many to get into in this article. So, I'll address the concepts behind the different types of tests and you can do your own research regarding the selection of the testing services/tools that fit your need.

Psych and IQ tests have been around for a long time. Psych tests generally measure two main components of a person's personality: how the candidate is "hardwired" and how the candidate has "evolved" over the years due to his/her experiences in the world. This stems back to the nature vs. nurture controversy that has been debated for decades. We're not going to solve this controversy here; suffice it to say that both are important. I have used, and my clients have used, many tests over the years. I strongly advise against using testing that only measures one side (e.g., how someone is hardwired), as this rarely gives you the full picture of the individual's makeup (e.g., EQ is a huge factor in behavior, especially in relation to others). Testing has become so accessible that it is a good practice to test both aspects. This will ensure that you have your bases covered.

IQ tests have also been around for decades. Most companies that use psych tests often don't also conduct an IQ test. I strongly encourage the use of IQ tests along with EQ (psych) tests. My reason stems from years as a training and manager. As a manager or trainer, I can often help manage an employee's emotions by providing him/her training, support, tools, mentoring, culture, etc., that aid in working in his "happy place," BUT I CANNOT FIX IQ! I'm not talking about education – that is completely different. I'm talking about the capacity for understanding. This is something that cannot be altered or managed. Therefore, since it is an uncontrollable, I find it worthy of testing early in the selection process.

Testing in summary:

- Testing is crucial in candidate selection.
- Psych testing tests two aspects of a person's personality: how they are hardwired and how they have grown up. Both are important.
- IQ testing should always be used – you can fix IQ!

Reference checks and testing are two crucial aspects to candidate selection – both should be done before you extend an offer to your prospective employee. Remember that we began this series of articles with these words of wisdom: ***The decisions you make regarding who you decide to surround yourself with have a greater impact on your success and quality of life than any other business decision you will make.*** Since this is the most important decision you can make as an employer, you should not leave anything to chance!

We hope you enjoyed this series of five articles relating to sourcing and selection.

In the next series of articles we're going to delve into the topic of training.

Until then...

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