

Carnegie Mellon Employment Reference Guidelines

This guide is to provide Carnegie Mellon Faculty and University Managers with assistance when obtaining employment references. If you need further help, contact your Human Resources (HR) Manager at 412-268-3386.

Reference checking is a fundamental part of the hiring process at Carnegie Mellon. Reference checking can be time-consuming because references are often difficult to obtain; however, every hiring supervisor is expected to secure references on the prospective employee they wish to hire. This also includes referencing Carnegie Mellon faculty and managers, if the candidate you are considering is a current or former university employee.

Why reference?—The goal of verifying references is to confirm your selection of the final candidate before making an employment offer. Because past performance is the best predictor of future performance, reference checking is an important part of the hiring process at Carnegie Mellon. You are strongly encouraged to become familiar with Carnegie Mellon's practices on the types of reference and background checks required for various positions, and then checking and documenting information obtained about a candidate.

Telephone Reference Checklist—The Telephone Reference Checklist attached to this document can be used to ensure consistency in the reference gathering process. *Use the script and questions provided to help get you started.*

Work vs. Personal References—Personal references provided by co-workers, friends, relatives and neighbors will, in all likelihood, be positive and may not adequately address the applicant's work performance. *Obtain work-related references from the candidate's immediate supervisor whenever possible.*

Begin your reference process by requesting reference contact information from the applicant if they did not submit this information when making their application through Careers@CarnegieMellon where this information is not required. As a general rule, try to speak directly to the applicant's immediate supervisor when seeking employment references. If you believe the employer is hesitant to provide information over the telephone, offer to have them call you back so that the person providing the reference can verify who you say you are.

Many employers will only provide dates of employment, job title and salary information. If this is company policy, date and document this information and proceed to referencing other employers listed. If you are unable to obtain reference information from a previous employer, document and date the outcome of your attempts to obtain this information. (*e.g., Unable to obtain reference information due to company policy, No records exist on the employee, Unable to be reached, etc.*) Employers are not obligated to provide answers to all information requested. You should at least be able to confirm dates of employment and position held.

Negative Information—If a negative pattern or significant performance issue becomes apparent through your discovery process, this may be an indication of future performance problems if this candidate is hired. Keep your antennae high! Ask the present or former employer if there is documented evidence of poor performance (*performance evaluations, disciplinary letters, etc*) to help you understand the reliability of the information being offered.

You should know that it is illegal for an employer to purposefully give false information for the sake of harming a former employee's reputation or preventing him/her from obtaining employment. Questions about personal information that is not job related should neither be asked nor provided by a prospective, present or former employer. If substantial discrepancies between the information you receive and what the applicant has stated appear to exist, contact your HR Manager for consultation.

Reference Methods—There are several ways to obtain references: by telephone, by mail/email and in person. Telephone is the preferred method of obtaining references at Carnegie Mellon because employers may be more willing to discuss performance on the telephone rather than committing comments to paper. In addition, telephone references can be obtained more quickly than written references. Obtain references on the final candidate for your position prior to extending an offer of employment. An electronic application submitted through Careers@CarnegieMellon gives you authorization to conduct references.

Applicant Release—Some employers will ask if the applicant has given you permission to reference. If this occurs, you may fax or send a copy of the general Careers@CarnegieMellon online application to the employer. The online application states the following (portions of the statement not applicable to permission to verify information have been deleted):

I authorize Carnegie Mellon University to make inquiries of any person, educational institution or other organization to give or to verify information pertinent to my application for employment at Carnegie Mellon, including criminal background checks, educational verification, employment references, driver history check and/or credit history if required. I understand and agree that all electronic applications and other submissions become the property of the University. I hereby confirm that the information provided by me in this application is true and complete. I understand and agree that any omissions or false statements in this document or any supplements thereto or in any interviews may result in cancellation of my application, rescission of an offer of employment, or immediate dismissal if subsequently employed. (portions deleted) If I do not agree with the foregoing terms, I understand and agree that I may not submit my application and must click "I Do Not Agree/Reject".

In addition, candidates may be asked to sign a reference authorization if a former employer requests a signed authorization. Employers may feel more comfortable releasing information if consent to gather information can be verified.

Prohibited Inquiries—Carnegie Mellon does not illegally discriminate in the employment process. Therefore, you must avoid questions regarding race, color, national or ethnic origin, sex, religion, age, disability, belief, veteran status, sexual orientation or gender identity, or marital/parental status. *Ask only job related questions.* For consistency use the questions and script recommended by Human Resources.

If an employer offers to give you comments “*off the record*”, beware! This may be a sign that third party, hearsay or any non–job-related information is about to be communicated. If this occurs, tell the employer that you wish to limit your discussion to job-related factors.

To avoid costly recruitment mistakes, here are a few steps to consider when investigating your candidate’s background.

1. Have each applicant submit the Careers@CarnegieMellon online application. Do not accept paper resumes. You should review the job history carefully. Make sure you have an accurate timeline of past employment dates and know what happened during any periods of unemployment. It’s OK to question the candidate about any gaps in work history through probing questions.
2. Require applicants to provide up-to-date information (job titles, addresses and phone numbers) on employers you wish to contact. If significant time has passed from when you received the applicant credentials to the actual interview and reference check, confirm that all information on the online resume/application is still current. (e.g. Is the applicant still with the same employer? Are they still a Carnegie Mellon employee? Is the reference contact information still correct?) This is a critical step in the reference process.
3. At a minimum, when referencing employers, confirm the applicant’s dates of employment and position. Try to get evaluative, job-related information by using the attached questions. You must document the steps you took to investigate your candidate, even if you can’t obtain information from present or former employers. You must have a record of the steps you took, to curb claims of negligent hiring.
4. You may ask the job applicant about their response to the question relating to a criminal conviction. This information can be found in the job question section of their online application. A conviction record will not necessarily bar a candidate from employment. However, you must contact your HR Manager to evaluate the information obtained.
5. Initiate official background checks appropriate to the position through Human Resources if required. For example, the Driver History Check (for the state in which the driver currently holds a license) must be initiated for driving-related positions. Act 33 and 34 clearances may be required for positions working with children in Pennsylvania. If you are unsure if additional checks are needed, consult your HR Manager prior to making an offer of employment.

6. Carnegie Mellon Human Resources conducts background checks on the final candidate for positions that will be responsible for handling significant amounts of cash, receiving merchandise, handling security-sensitive information and other staff positions. You must contact your HR Manager to initiate the background check process. Your HR Manager will work with you and process this type of check through our vendor, Employment Background Investigations (EBI). You will receive information on how to work through the university's process and your department will be invoiced for any fees required to complete this check.
7. It is permissible to ask candidates to provide an educational transcript of academic progress to validate the education and/or GPA listed on their credentials.
8. Written letters of reference should not be a substitute for obtaining first-hand and current reference information yourself.
9. Do not reveal any reference information obtained from a present or former employer to a job applicant. If the candidate inquires about the outcome of a reference check, simply state that it is not the practice of Carnegie Mellon to share employment reference information with job applicants. If the applicant persists, contact your HR Manager.
10. Do not skip over reference checks to make a quick hiring decision or make an employment decision solely on the fact that a colleague or friend may be providing a personal reference. Better to be safe than sorry!
11. Finally, you are encouraged to maintain the highest level of confidentiality throughout the process. Do not delegate the reference gathering process to anyone outside the hiring process. Share information gathered on a need-to-know basis only.

Telephone Reference Checklist (suggested script)

My name is (name) from the (department) at Carnegie Mellon University. We are filling a (title) position within our department and would like to verify employment information on (applicant name), who has indicated (he/she) was employed by your organization from (beginning and ending dates). (Applicant name) has submitted the applicant statement on our online application, which authorizes Carnegie Mellon to obtain reference information.

Name/title of person contacted: _____

Is this person the candidate's immediate supervisor? yes no

If not the immediate supervisor, what is the employment association?

Company name and address: _____

Phone: _____ Date reference initiated: _____

1. Was he/she employed by your organization during this period of time?
2. What was the nature of the job?
3. What did you think of his/her work?
4. What are his/her strongest points?
5. What are his/her areas for improvement?
6. How did he/she interact with other people on the job?
7. Why did he/she leave your organization?
8. Please comment on the following:
 - a. dependability

- b. ability to assume responsibility
- c. ability to follow instruction
- d. degree of supervision needed
- e. quantity and quality of work
- f. ability to work independently
- g. ability to work as a team member

9. Would you re-employ this person? yes no If no, why?

10. What was (applicant's name) final salary? \$_____

11. Do you have any final comment on his/her work performance?