How to Establish Professional References

Most, if not all employers and graduate schools will ask you for the names of your references or letters of recommendations. But what does that mean? Who are appropriate people to ask to serve in this role?

You want to identify people who can speak about your skills, your strengths, your professional abilities, your next step goals. They should be able to give specifics about what you can bring to the position, employer or graduate school program. In other words, you want to pick people who know you in a professional, competent way.

Whom should I ask to be references?

If you are an underclassman without many established connections, consider using faculty as part of your references. Look at the classes you are taking and what topics to you find interesting. Visit those faculty during their office hours. You don’t need to use that time only when you have a question about class. It is a great way to start to get to know your faculty on a more informal basis and they will start to learn more about you and your career goals.

If you have had career development experience, your supervisor would be a natural selection for a reference. While faculty members can speak to your academic abilities, a supervisor can speak to your business and professional abilities. Be sure to find time to talk with your supervisor about your career aspirations. Some supervisors will start that discussion with you as a way to get to know you better. If your supervisor doesn’t, be sure to carve out time for the two of you to talk informally. Another reference source could be the project manager of a task you worked on. In some instances, supervisors don’t interact much with interns or staff. But you may have significant contact with someone else in the organization. Get to know them as well.

If you are a member of a student organization, especially if you are in a leadership role, be sure to connect with your advisor. Employers and graduate school admissions offices are looking for students who have done more than just go to class. Advisors can talk about your level of commitment, your ability to balance school and leadership roles.

A word of caution: You might know a faculty member in a number of different roles-as advisor to a student organization, in class as your instructor, as supervisor for a research project. Know that if this is the case and your list that faculty member as a reference, they might be asked about your work performance in any or all of these areas. If you are a committed member of the student organization but aren’t as attentive in class, that information might be shared. While we expect that employers won’t use a more in depth relationship to dig for information not related to the job, we can’t control what the employers ask.

Once you have asked a person to be a reference, be sure to keep them updated on how your search or application process is going. If you have been invited to interview, whether that be for a position or grad program, be sure to let your references know and give them a copy of your resume and the job description, if appropriate. That way when they are called, they can talk very specifically about how your skills and experiences match what employers and admission staff are looking for.

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