



REFERENCING FOR RESULTS

References are one of the most powerful yet underutilized tools in the employment process. Aside from a strong personal assessment of a candidate's presentation, nothing is as important to an employment decision. Yet, for some reason, references are often regarded as an adjunct to the hiring process -- an "end game" step, treated by some as optional. In fact, because the predictive validity of references should significantly exceed most initial interview evaluations, references should be viewed as *the* most important phase of selection. Employment offers made in the absence of references are less than fully informed and based primarily on a positive emotional reaction to a candidate. Such emotional decisions, however, can result in eventual disappointment for all parties.

Unfortunately, many job offers are made -- committing large sums in salaries and benefits -- without conducting thorough references. Referencing is sometimes bypassed due to time pressure or when an employing official feels their assessment interview ability is so keen that referencing is unnecessary. Alternatively, there may be a concern that the references will not be candid and, in some cases, there might even be a fear that the reference process would tarnish an apparently perfect candidate and prolong the recruiting process. Whatever the excuse, bypassing the reference step can be very costly and probably accounts for a significant percent of the turnover experienced by business and industry. Enhanced selection decisions should result from the careful application of sound reference strategies and tactics.

The Power of Referencing

The importance and power of the reference is based on the fact that predicting an individual's future behavior is best accomplished by understanding their past behavior -- in this case, through the eyes of a reference. Although people do change at certain critical times in their business or personal lives, those changes tend to be more gradual than climactic. Therefore, gathering observations of an individual's past job performance becomes the best way to predict future results. In our view, it is a far better predictor than interviews, projective tests or psychological evaluations. That is not to say that any of the above assessment techniques should be downgraded, avoided or abandoned, however, if you had but one technique to use, emphasize the one with the greatest power for predicting on-the-job behavior -- the reference.

Through careful referencing we can take advantage of the thousands of hours of data observation that have been going on in the workplace by those for whom, with whom and under whom the candidate has worked. Contrast this level of exposure with interview evaluations, which probably average four to six hours for middle management positions and more for top executive positions. Even with 10 to 15 hours of interviewing, how sure can we really be of the candidate's true ability to perform without outside confirmation of the interview results?



An expert interviewer, having conducted in-depth interviews of a candidate, may develop some strongly held opinions about that candidate's on-the-job performance. Certainly that interviewer has built a series of assumptions to be tested through the reference process and is in a position to evaluate reference input against personal impressions from the interview itself. However, because the candidate has self-interest in portraying himself or herself as favorably as possible (without being grossly inaccurate in responding to the interview situation and questions), the interviewer -- regardless of professional training -- has imperfect ability to translate the interview impressions into an accurate description of what the person would actually do in a job situation. At best, we can make probability statements about how the individual may have performed or might perform. Good referencing significantly raises our ability to predict job behavior.

It is the reference's ability to identify outstanding performers that forms the true foundation of the executive search process. Because references provide observations of actual job behavior and can differentiate high talent personnel, the executive search industry is structured on the premise that referencing should come at the beginning, not the end, of the selection process. When an executive search consultant contacts sources seeking recommendations of qualified individuals for a position, they are, in effect, conducting a reference before the would-be candidate knows about the position! As the process continues, those individuals who have the most outstanding references are eventually approached as candidates.

Amassing and analyzing reference data does require some skill in interviewing and is enhanced through the use of specific strategies and tactics outlined below. It also requires the dedication of several hours to complete the process. The pay back in avoiding faulty hiring decisions and assimilating people effectively into the organization, however, more than justifies the investment.

Purposes of the Reference

References provide a source of new data about a candidate, verify data already collected, and form a sound basis for the supervision or management of the individual once employed.

During the search (or networking) process -- when the referencing is being utilized as a candidate identification tool -- the purpose of the reference is to identify those people who have achieved predefined results and can replicate them in a new organization. Similarly, when a reference is being conducted after the candidate has been interviewed, one of the purposes of that reference conversation is to gather new facts and impressions about the candidate from another source. Topics explored in this data gathering relate to problem-solving ability, creativity, peer and authority relationships, ability to function under pressure, and a host of other issues relevant to the position and the employing organization.

A second objective of referencing is to test information already collected. This includes verifying claims made by the candidate during the interview concerning role, compensation, achievement levels, etc. Educational credentials should always be independently verified and credit worthiness should be evaluated as circumstances dictate. A part of this verification process is to double-check the honesty of the candidate's responses given during the interview. A more important level of verification, however, is determining the individual's *actual* achievements. Not only will a candidate want to appear in the most favorable light in an interview situation, most successful and ego-involved executives tend to believe that they were the moving force behind a new idea, project, product or enhancement in the management process. Speaking with individuals who have worked closely with the candidate will tend to result in a more balanced view of the candidate's true contribution. This is not to imply that candidates intentionally misrepresent their achievements, but they may tend to "under remember" the contributions others make in a dynamic problem-solving process.

In addition to gathering new data and verifying past performance, the single most important result of the referencing process is establishing an effective management strategy for the individual. Knowing how a candidate will react to various management styles and directives, what level of autonomy they desire and with which they can be entrusted, etc., becomes critically important to the individual's effective assimilation into the organization. Having a verified perception of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses will allow his or her superior to select appropriate motivational strategies and be ready to intercede in areas where guidance may be needed.

For example, if the references have indicated that the chosen candidate is well versed technically, a very competent manager of subordinates, thrives in an environment of independence, and quick to ask for guidance when needed, a loose supervisory style would be in order. This candidate should be allowed to exert independent action immediately.

Suppose, however, the references indicate that the individual is highly competent in a technical sense, has developed good supervisory skills, seems to be happiest and most productive when feedback is frequent and positive, and may initially be reluctant to ask questions as soon as a problem is identified. In this case, the individual will need to be given authority to operate independently, but monitored on a more frequent basis than in the first example.

If these two supervisory styles were reversed, one executive would be frustrated because he or she is being watched too closely, while the other might feel under-recognized and defer decisions by not seeking out input aggressively from his or her superior. Given proper supervision, however, both candidates may be highly effective in their assigned role.



REFERENCING STRATEGY

Tell Candidates You Reference

To assist candidates in maintaining their objectivity, make it clear -- through implication or a direct statement during the interview -- that you intend to conduct reference conversations at an appropriate time. Candidates referred by a prior colleague or superior will understand that you already know something of their skills, while other candidates will know that you have no insight into their work. Saying that you intend to make reference inquiries will moderate any boastful tendencies that might be displayed during the interview. A subtle way of making the point with more senior executives is to make notes during the interview of the names of people for whom a candidate has worked.

Respect the Need for Confidentiality

With the exception of freely given references in a sourcing environment, never conduct a reference conversation -- no matter how informal -- without the candidate's permission to do so. During the interview, it is entirely appropriate to ask whether you could contact a specific individual named at a prior employer. The candidate's response itself may be indicative of the general tone of the reference one might receive if the call were made. If a candidate is reluctant to have any references checked which predate his present employment, this may be a warning signal about the quality of the references that would be forthcoming.

Candidates do realize that *any* reference conversation might expose them since it is never known exactly with whom a reference might be acquainted within an industry or community. Suppose, for example, that a senior executive conducts a general reference conversation with a business colleague in whose organization the person had worked in the past. That colleague does not know that the candidate is still gainfully employed and makes a casual remark to a friend on the employer's board. Such circumstances can range anywhere from embarrassing to career ending for the candidate. Conducting references for anyone presently employed must be done with caution and sensitivity, and only with the candidate's permission.

Pre-Reference Where Possible

Whenever possible pre-reference a candidate prior to an interview. This can be done through the executive search process or when a potential candidate is unemployed. Because an unemployed candidate's candor could be impacted by the need for renewed income, the evaluation of pre-interview data is particularly useful.

Since the references are to be conducted in any event -- and can be done before entering into a lengthy interview -- why not do them first? If the references are indicative of probable failure, time has been saved. If the references are generally supportive and clues



about the candidate's strengths and weaknesses are uncovered, a more insightful first interview should result.

Reference Thoroughly

Referencing should be as extensive as possible, with significant time being donated to the process for more senior positions. The references should be inclusive by level, source and time frame.

It is important to speak with references at superior, peer and subordinate levels to discover the discernible, yet unique patterns through which an executive relates to others inside and outside the organization. Since these patterns may be tied to authority relationships, the style up, down and across an organization may vary and should, therefore, be checked at all three levels.

One could find, for example, that a highly driven and politically oriented candidate may provide extensive upward communications, adequate downward communications and inaccurate peer level communications. While this example may cast the individual in a negative light, because of past results or technical skill, he or she may still be the most appropriate person for the job. If so, the communications style at the peer level should be a subject for early counseling. Behavior can be better controlled if it is known beforehand rather than going through the discomfort of discovering it on the job.

To be sure that behavior patterns have been consistent or improving, check a few references dating back over a period of years. However, the focus should be (to the degree possible) on more recent experience/behavior. Incidentally, personal friends and neighbors should never be substituted for business references because they will prove to be neighborly but totally devoid of value in predicting job success!

Every candidate will (or should) provide references when asked. It is important to check the suggested references to the extent that they are truly relevant to the candidate's history and performance, but it is equally important to gather names of other individuals beyond those initially suggested by the candidate. After all, who wouldn't stack the deck in their favor rather than the other way around! The most reassuring results come when the "second tier" references are as enthusiastic about the candidate as the initial hand-picked group.

Some unique problems may arise as the reference process expands beyond the candidate's "preferred" list. Differences of opinion about the candidate are often unearthed and it takes skill to form a cogent picture. Another difficulty is that many people form generalized opinions about an individual and interpret what they do in accordance with that opinion, resulting in a halo effect of "good references" or "bad references". It is the responsibility of the interviewer to get a balanced view from each reference, keeping in mind that there are probably elements of an individual's behavior which are being



accurately observed by each person contacted. A composite analysis of the candidate, integrating the interview and reference data, will be more accurate than the results of either on a stand-alone basis.

THE TACTICS OF REFERENCING

When to Reference

As may be evident already, referencing should be done at the earliest possible time without jeopardizing the candidate's employment status. If referencing prior to an initial interview is possible, it will provide important data for structuring interview priorities.

Alternatively, it may result in rejecting the candidate prior to the interview, saving time and the burdensome task of explaining the rejection to the candidate.

Number of References

The number of references will vary directly with the level and complexity of the job and any unresolved questions about the candidate following the interview. For an executive level position it is difficult to imagine conducting less than half a dozen significant references so that a comprehensive picture can be developed from superiors, peers and subordinates from past and present employment. In general, one should continue referencing until a clear and predictable response pattern to the reference inquiries has been established.

Who Should Call

Reference conversations should be conducted by the person who has the greatest combination of interviewing skill, knowledge of the candidate, and perspective of the position. In most cases, the employing manager is the most knowledgeable and, particularly where technical issues are paramount, can ask the most insightful questions. Line managers do vary in their interviewing skills, however, and the human resource executive or the executive search consultant may be able to do a superior job in those cases. Gathering high quality data is the primary objective and careful consideration should be given to selecting the appropriate caller.

One person should be clearly designated to contact each reference since references tend to be most open and give the most information to the first caller. If two or more people contact the same reference, the effort may annoy the person contacted, and less useful information could result.



Conducting A Reference

An employment reference is essentially an interview, albeit an interview of a third party to a hiring decision. While the ideal method of conducting an interview is to do it in person, it is most practical to conduct references via telephone. As with any interview, if it is to be effective, it must be both well planned and well executed.

Reference Planning- There are three sets of data to cover during each reference evaluation: Critical job skills, unresolved interview impressions, and verification items. To guard against major omissions, you may want to have a listing of important items prepared prior to the reference conversation. The reference topic outline on pages 17 and 18 may also be helpful in planning the call.

The first major objective is to get the reference to discuss his or her assessment of the candidate's skills and knowledge required to perform effectively in the open position. This list should be virtually identical to the critical content topics addressed in the candidate interview.

A second objective is to resolve feelings or questions about the candidate's management priorities or leadership capability. The range of issues here could include business philosophy, operating style, communications patterns and many others. If anyone in the hiring process has unresolved questions after preliminary interviews have been conducted, these should receive high priority during the reference process.

Finally, there are verification items that need to be checked. These include the title and scope of responsibility, achievements, nature of reporting relations, compensation level, and others.

Setting the Tone- As with any interview, it is important to achieve a professional, relaxed and productive atmosphere early in your conversation so that the maximum amount of information can be gathered. This is a particularly important aspect in telephone interviews. The telephone is an impersonal instrument and extra care must be taken to assure that good rapport is established. When you reach someone on the telephone, what they are doing when you call, the pressures of that day, or, for that matter, who may be sitting in their office are all unknown. It is therefore necessary to state directly the purpose of your call, indicate the importance to which you attach to the conversation, and then inquire when it would be appropriate to speak. It is much better to delay the process by a few days and do it when the reference is able to focus on the issues than to try to conduct what should be a thirty-minute discussion in five minutes. It is what isn't learned in a reference call that may be disturbing later. Stressing the importance of the conversation will telegraph to the reference the seriousness with which you wish to proceed.

Topic Sequence- It is preferable to begin the reference interview with the focus on non[controversial aspects of the prior work relationship. Arrange your outline so that the



most sensitive questions (for example, the specific events associated with a termination) come toward the end of the conversation. During the early phase of the reference interview, the key is to encourage the individual to talk and to focus on your problem, which is obtaining data about the candidate. Starting with a highly controversial aspect of the candidate's employment may create a dilemma for the reference, who hasn't yet decided whether you are to be trusted with the information. Better to spend the first few minutes discussing non-controversial items in the hope that, when you get to the sensitive issue, the reference will be in the mood to address it candidly.

Framing Questions- In a reference interview it is important to spend most of your time listening to the responses and making notes about your candidate. To do so, questions must be phrased so that they trigger a rich, detailed response. The first questions in any topic area should be open and broad. Questions that begin with "how", "why", "please explain", or "tell me about" are the most useful in getting the reference to speak at length on a selected topic. For example, opening a reference interview with the instruction, "Tell me about your relationship with Candidate X and how your responsibility areas interrelated" will generate a much more interesting, lengthy, and informative response than asking the question, "What was Candidate X's title during the years he she worked for you?"

The easiest way to begin the conversation is to ask the reference to explain the nature of the relationship he or she had with the candidate, its duration, and the responsibilities the candidate had during the time they worked together. The conversation can then move to an analysis of individual contributions and verification of other aspects of the prior employment situation. Let the reference talk freely while you take notes, introducing topics to meet the flow of the conversation. Forcing the reference to answer questions in a specific sequence may be aggravating and result in less input. Encourage conversation and minimize unnecessary interruptions.

Once initial definitional questions have been answered, move into an analysis of contributions. This can be easily done by saying, "During the time that Jones worked for you, what would you say were the major contributions which can be attributed to his or her personal effort?" Notice this open-ended question does not indicate what the candidate has represented as accomplishments. It is interesting to see the different perspectives brought out by asking each reference such open-ended questions. If a topic about which the candidate has talked about at length is not forthcoming, then a follow-up question can be asked such as, "From your observations, how would you evaluate Jones' ability to select and train subordinate managers?" If there are concerns about dissimilarities in culture between your organization and the other one, a question might be asked after the responsibilities had been outlined, such as, "What was the atmosphere in your organization during those years", or, "What did the loss of the XYZ account do to senior management morale?"

As you enter the latter stage of the reference, begin to focus on the candidate's relative shortcomings. Having noted earlier allusions to areas of concern, refer back to them for further discussion. For example, you might say, "You mentioned earlier that the retooling of the old plant was significantly over budget. Could you explain to me what Smith's impact was on that retooling and how, in retrospect, it might have been managed more effectively?" Thirty minutes into the conversation, you should get a more complete response than in the first two minutes.

As a last question or series of questions, you want to ask for the reference's personal opinion of the candidate's shortcomings. When doing this, it is important to reassure the reference that you have interpreted their overall comments as being predominantly supportive. Start with a summary statement such as, "You have told me a lot of things which are very favorable about Smith, particularly as a financial manager. I am gaining additional confidence that he/she could contribute significantly in the role that we have been discussing here at ABC Company. However, no one is perfect, and I would be interested in your opinion as to what developmental needs may still exist with our candidate. We need to know how we can make Smith productive and improve his/her performance and abilities over time. Please give me some of your thoughts in this regard." Wait for a complete response and then go back and probe for clarification of specific items. This may be the most important data you get -- and you want to be sure you get the maximum response.

Probing and Controlling- Once the reference is talking freely, control the direction by using probes (follow-up questions) to expand the reference's response on a specific subject. When the reference begins to speak about something you think is important to learn about the candidate, you might probe by saying, "Explain that to me in a little more detail," or, "Give me an example of what you mean," or, "I'm not sure I understand."

To change the general direction of the response, pick an appropriate moment and introduce a new broad topic. Here is an example: "You have given me an excellent overview of Smith's responsibilities. Now I would like your opinion as to what his/her most significant contributions were during the time he/she was in that position."

Problem Questions- An additional technique involves the use of the problem questions. There are times when a candidate's experience does not correspond directly to a key job issue. By posing a problem situation, either real or hypothetical, you can get a prior associate's estimate of how effectively the candidate might be able to solve such a problem. An example would be, "Candidate Brown has had significant exposure to managing direct selling and market research functions, but no real experience in product development and introduction. Please tell me how effectively you think he/she would be if assigned to manage a product development group."

Another interesting technique is to ask the reference to compare the candidate to all other people he or she has worked with in a particular area. Here is an example: "Comparing



the candidate to all other managers you have known in your career, how would you rate Jones in terms of his/her ability to step into an unprofitable company, develop a turnaround strategy and execute the strategy -- which may include a significant redevelopment of the corporate staff?" This is also an excellent vehicle for initiating a discussion of strengths and weaknesses.

Special Situations

There are several situations in which referencing can be slightly more difficult due to unique candidate circumstances, company policy concerning referencing of a prior employee, or state statutes regarding the conduct of references. The sections that follow will provide some guidance for those occasions.

Single Continuous Employment- Referencing can be difficult when a candidate has spent many years with one employer and has not announced his or her resignation. In the least desirable circumstance, the only option will be to conduct references after employment negotiations have been completed. Where this is the case, it is preferable to issue the candidate an offer "contingent upon referencing," essentially guaranteeing the candidate that references will be contacted for verification purposes following acceptance of employment. Should the candidate be concerned about the content of those references, it would be expected that the offer would be refused rather than accepted.

There are, however, two other ways in which some reference data may be obtained. It is possible that prior superiors, subordinates or peers who left that employer in recent years could be contacted on a confidential basis without jeopardizing employment. There is also the possibility that the candidate could approach one or more trusted senior executives within the organization and arrange to have them contacted prior to the acceptance of an offer. Obviously, this is not risk free, and the candidate has the only vote on proceeding!

Restrictive Company Policies- Many companies have adopted policies which prohibit or severely limit the amount of data which they will officially provide to a potential employer. These policies are generally adopted by companies that have experienced unfortunate legal entanglements due to discrimination suits filed by former employees. Some have rules so restrictive that they will release only dates of hire, job titles and rehire status.

There are several ways to contend with this situation. First, since the human resource organization is normally appointed guardian of the referencing policy, it is best to make contact in the line organization unless, of course, the candidate under consideration is a human resource professional. Contacting human resources is relatively non-productive in any event, since the person or persons from whom you really wish to get data are those who worked closely with the candidate in their line or staff departments.



Second, regardless of whether a company has a restrictive policy or not, avoid using the word “reference” when making a phone call. If a restrictive policy exists, the use of the word itself may trigger a “we’re not allowed to give references” response. Rather, indicate that an individual who has previously worked with the reference has been extended (or is to be extended) an offer of employment. Communicate that you are calling in an effort to discover how that person can be best integrated into your organization. Begin by asking about the candidate’s positive contributions to ease the reference past any concerns about breaking company policy. Then ask the former colleague’s insights into how you can engage the individual most effectively and gain the maximum level of contribution. This positive tone will get a better response than if the person being contacted suspects that you are looking for reasons to “rule out” a candidate. Additionally, you are indicating a real interest in helping the candidate, not just performing a “routine” reference verification. Through these techniques, you should be able to gently move the manager into assisting you in a very critical decision process.

If the would-be reference is still reluctant, try a more confronting approach. For example, you might say, “Look, this decision is too critical for my company and candidate Brown’s career for me to make a mistake. I really need your confidential assistance. Let me tell you about the nature of the challenges Brown would face and, then -- totally off the record -- tell me if he and I can be successful together.” Immediately begin to explain the job and problems to be solved. Very few managers will stand mute after you’re done.

Legal Considerations- Some states have enacted legislation regulating the gathering of background information for credit reporting purposes that impacts the conduct of employment references. Regardless of where you conduct your business, you have the right to gather reference information. However, how it is gathered may be constrained by law. For example, some states now require that the candidate sign a statement indicating their acquiescence that the data may be obtained and, in some cases, resulting written documentation has to be forwarded to the candidate as well as to the employer. Since most referencing concerns those who are eventually employed, candidates rarely have qualms about signing such a release. In any event, one should be sure they are complying with applicable legislation.

SAMPLE REFERENCE REPORT

The following example summarizes how insights can be gained through the reference process, both in terms of verification of an executive’s style and supervisory needs. The data is taken from a completed search assignment and is presented with the permission of the candidate and client. Although names and affiliations have been changed, the content has not. All information is reconstructed from notes taken at the time as tape recorders are not used.

The cover letter to the client contains a summation of the candidate’s strengths and priorities gained from the individual references. The subsequent documentation is in highlight form, encapsulating the comments made by the references during a series of telephone



communications with the search consultant. A clear picture emerges suggesting the candidate's motivation to change employers, predominant management style and personal motivational requirements.

*Mr. Clarence O. Nelson
Managing Director
Consulting Associates, Ltd.
Los Angeles, California*

Dear Clarence:

Reference conversations concerning Ms. Sandra A. Smith have been completed. We are happy to report that her past mentors and associates uniformly regard her to be a quality consultant and a client-centered project manager who has cultivated outstanding practice development, supervisory and staff training skills. She is viewed as personable and mature, intelligent and flexible, and excelling in her communications abilities. Ms. Smith is felt to be a good strategist who is very knowledgeable in the health care field. Apparently, she is tough-minded, yet cares about her people; possesses great integrity; and is a team player who shares credit freely with others.

Sandra is perceived to be extraordinarily hard working and highly motivated, so much so that she could be a "burn out" candidate if not encouraged to relax at times. She is characterized as a worrier who "mothers" her staff people through their development phases but, apparently, gains great dedication from them. And, while she doesn't miss deadlines, she does procrastinate a bit.

Aside from there being a question about our ability to sell relocation, her references believe that Ms. Smith will be successful in your organization. All said they would like to respond to any additional inquiries you would like to pose directly and can be reached at the indicated telephone numbers.

Through the interview and reference process, we have developed a comprehensive picture of Sandra's style, skills and results. Your plan to proceed with an offer is well justified and we should collaborate immediately on its structure and final recruitment strategy.

Very truly yours,

DIECKMANN & ASSOCIATES, LTD.



**CONFIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
REFERENCE SUMMARY**

Sandra A. Smith

Reference

**Mr. Russ Raymond
R. S. Raymond & Associates
New York, New York**

**Telephone
212/212-1212**

Commentary

Mr. Raymond and Ms. Smith worked together at BCD Consultants and Mr. Raymond served as Ms. Smith's superior for a period of time. Mr. Raymond's comments are paraphrased below.

I recruited Sandra out of the M.B.A. program at Stanford and she worked for me for five years. She did very well. She is very bright. She is very creative. She is a quick learner. Sandra moved to a very seasoned project manager from a raw recruit in those five years.

I have tried to recruit Sandra twice since I left BCD Consultants. However, she wanted to make her own mark without me, and went to Acme where she could build her own reputation.

Sandra's work was always in the highly quality to superlative category. She always does very, very fine work. She figures out a way to meet client requirements quickly. She also worked on new products with me and did very well, supervising several. We worked very closely together on strategic planning.

Her ability to supervise others? Sandra is the kind of a person who works long and hard. She pushes herself and apparently focuses her whole life around the job. Still, she can procrastinate a bit -- but she never missed a deadline.

In my early experience with her, Sandra tended to mother people a bit. She is a very good trainer and the people she trains can function well and on their own once she works with them. It takes a toll on her own time, but she is always quick to invest that time.

Sandra is a bit of a worrier. She worries people along if she feels they aren't doing the job. I have talked to others at Acme, however, they say she has really developed nicely as a manager and practice director there.



From a selling sense -- one-on-one -- she is a fantastic sales person. She makes a good presentation; establishes quick rapport; she is facile. She didn't do lots of cold-call selling at BCD Consultants, but did some formal presentations and closings. She always held her own quite well.

Sandra is one of those people who will always rise to the top. When I think of Sandra, I think of her great integrity. She knows what is right and will stand up for it. She may have gotten herself into some trouble speaking her mind at BCD Consultants and limited her upward mobility there as a result.

I think Sandra can really do extraordinarily well in consulting if she has a mind to stay in the field. She can handle partner level responsibility right now. National Practice Director for Health Care? I don't know. She has to be challenged. I guess it's more a question of whether the products which the firm wants to offer match her skills. The biggest risk for your client is that Sandra will burn herself out trying to do too much too fast.

Sandra has this unique ability to cut both ways. She can be tough -- as she was when she rebuilt the staff at Acme -- or she can be "motherly-touchy-feely" as the situation warrants.

I set very high standards and had a reputation at BCD Consultants for being a touch manager. I got a call from Sandra six months after she joined Acme and she told me she understood why I did things the way I did -- and she was apparently adopting similar tough-minded approaches to her own practice management.

To summarize--the fact I have tried to hire Sandra twice tells you exactly how I feel.

**CONFIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
REFERENCE SUMMARY**

Sandra A. Smith

Reference

**Mr. John Johns
Director, Financial Services Practice
Howard Jones Company
Chicago, Illinois**

**Telephone
312/312-1212**



Commentary

Mr. Johns and Ms. Smith were both employed as regional vice presidents at Acme Consultants and worked at a peer level. Mr. John's comments are summarized as follows:

I was Vice President with Acme in Atlanta and, for one year, my tenure overlapped with Sandra's when she was first appointed to her responsibilities to run the Chicago consulting practice.

I would say that Sandra rates fairly high on all three of your main points of quality of service, practice development, and supervision. She is very active with the Health Care Financial Management Association and she is putting Acme's best foot forward there.

Sandra has very good communicative abilities. She always talks professionally and in a very congenial fashion.

I know that Sandra excels in project management. The Chicago office is notorious for meeting deadlines and realization is always tops in Chicago, too. That office has always done good work.

I don't know the people she supervises personally, but I know of no problems in that regard.

I know that Sandra is a pusher--that is, she is very strongly motivated--and very personable as well.

I'm married to an Acme person and so I see Sandra frequently, but on a social basis. I know that she is serving on several important industry committees and she knows her field very well. She really knows alternative revenue sources--and that will be a hot consulting area.

I think Sandra is a very good consultant and should do well with your client. I don't know if she's wedded to Chicago. She has lived in New York and Washington, D.C., but she is pretty sophisticated and I don't think you could move her to a smaller city.

**CONFIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
REFERENCE SUMMARY**

Sandra A. Smith

Reference

**Ms. Catherine Carlson
Vice President,**



**Business Development
Acme Consultants
Chicago, Illinois**

**Telephone
312/312-3121**

Commentary

Ms. Carlson functions in a practice development mode in the corporate office of Acme and, as such, works closely with Ms. Smith in her business development activities in the Chicago practice office. Ms. Carlson spoke with us quite openly as summarized below:

I have terribly mixed emotions about this whole issue. I really have high regard for Sandra and perhaps you are going to get a very prejudiced view.

I have been with Acme for four and a half years and have worked with Sandra for most of that time. She is the head of consulting for our largest office which covers a twelve-state Midwest area.

I have always been very impressed with Sandra. I think that she, as a manager, is very good. The thing I am struck with is that the quality of the product is always excellent. The things that she would be intimately involved with, you would not ever question the quality because it would be very, very high.

In terms of business-getting, that's my primary focus. She and I worked together on that front, but she has brought business to the company independently of my involvement.

The people who work for Sandra respect her. I have seen her in action in her own office and it is clear that the respect is mutual. She genuinely cares and she is a team player, not a destructive competitor. That is a great personal quality. She is not a jealous person. She doesn't mind sharing the credit and, as a matter of fact, she doesn't really need it -- she works more for the gratification she gets from clients.

The down side? (long pause) I am having a problem with your question. It's an honest problem (long pause). The only problem might be if there were sex role expectations in her new environment -- but she has dealt with that before, and I think successfully. I don't know how to answer your question.

Her communications ability is very strong -- perhaps that's her strongest suit. She is also very mature and very nice in addition. Anyone would be lucky to have her.

I think Sandra's area of greatest concern is with her long-term potential with Acme, and I think that she has a legitimate concern. The company, since it has gone public, has changed its emphasis and probably will restrict the growth of the traditional consulting



practice and, therefore, I reluctantly give you a strong recommendation to recruit her. I am heartsick that she might leave. Here, however, she is at a point where she can't do much more and she recognizes that she needs to grow and find the right place to continue her career development.

EXECUTIVE REFERENCE OUTLINE

Review

Job Responsibilities and Accountabilities

Required Experience and Credentials

Candidate Resume

Interview Notes

Questioning Techniques

Plan

Who to Contact

Key Topic Sequence

Problem Questions

Conduct Basic Reference

Establish rapport and note significant opening remarks

Relationship with Candidate

-Business

-Social

-Both

Nature and Length of Acquaintance

Last Contact

Position and Principal Responsibilities

Performance Expectations

Candidate's Key Accomplishments

Specific Qualities/Strengths Displayed

Other Candidate Strengths

Probe Specific Skills and Abilities

Select for discussion as appropriate. Ask for opinions and examples.

Industry/Functional Knowledge

Management Ability

Planning and Organizing

Motivating

Administrative Control

Delegating

Risk Taking

Staffing



Analytical Ability, Problem Solving and Intelligence
Creativity and Imagination
Communications Ability
Written Reports
Oral Presentations
Informal (Up, Down and Across)
Emotional Maturity
Handling Stress
Predictability of Action
Self Understanding
Judgment and Self Discipline
Initiative and Drive
Follow-Through
Self Confidence
Growth Potential
In Present of Former Company
Estimate in Proposed Situation
Candidate Career Expectations

Summarize Job Data

Most Obvious Strengths and Weaknesses
How to Manage this Person Most Effectively
How to Enhance Performance
Developmental Needs
Reason for Termination of Employment

Discuss Personal Information

Describe the demands of the job, particularly travel (if appropriate), and any obvious effects on family situations, such as required entertaining, etc. Ask for any information that might have impact on job performance, such as:
Family Life and Relocation
Wife's/Husband's Career or Personal Needs
Health
Personal Habits

Conclude Conversation

Verify Compensation
Names of Other Potential References Who Know Candidate Well, Thank Reference for Confidential Cooperation

Assess

Candidate Strengths
Candidate Weaknesses
Reference Quality



Reference Objectivity

REFERENCE SUMMARY

Complete after call

Candidate-

Reference Called-

Position

Company

Address

**Phone
Number**

**Called
By**

Date

Relationship

Supervisor

Former Supervisor

Co-Worker

Subordinate

Other

Response Time

Friendly

Lukewarm

Cool

Hostile

Evaluation of Reference

Factual

Vague

Insufficient Knowledge

Open

Holding Back

Biased For

objective



Biased Against

Capsule of Reference's Evaluation

Strengths

Weaknesses

Overall
