

During a Job Search, When Should You Give Out References?

Question:

I am a third-year associate and have been working at the same firm since I first started practicing law. I am currently conducting a job search, and I have a question about giving references to a potential employer. When is the best time to do this, and are there any pitfalls I should try to avoid? - T.S.

Answer:

Dear T.S.,

There are a few different things you will want to consider when choosing references and giving them to a potential employer. I've outlined some steps below to help you navigate through this sometimes-tricky portion of the interviewing process.

Sign on the Dotted Line.

When a job search is confidential, you will want to wait until the last possible moment before handing over your references. [Generally firms will ask to check references once an offer letter is received and signed by the candidate. In the offer letter the firm will generally include language stating that their offer is contingent upon checking a candidate's references.](#)

If a firm asks you for references before they send you an offer letter and/or before you formally decide to accept the offer, speak to the firm's recruiting representative and see if you can negotiate the checking of references after the firm's offer has been accepted by you. If you are [currently employed and your firm does not know you are looking, you will want to try to maintain the confidentiality of your job search for as long as possible.](#)

[If you give references from your current employer before you receive an offer, there is always a slight chance that your confidentiality may somehow get breached.](#) Thus, try to postpone giving references until the very final stages of your job search.

Choose Wisely.

Law firms generally require around two to three partner references from candidates. You will want to choose attorneys who have firsthand knowledge of both your work product and your professionalism. Ideally, you also want your references to be people who are personally fond of you and who will champion all of your assets to the interviewing firm.

If you are not able to secure all partner references, try to ask the next most senior-level attorneys you have worked with to act as your references. Do not use associates who are more junior than you for your references, as most firms will only want to speak to those attorneys who have held a supervisory role over you.

Confirm, Confirm, Confirm.

After you have solidified which attorneys will act as your professional references, it is important that you confirm how they will describe you to a potential employer. When asking partners or attorneys to be your references, it is perfectly fair to ask them if they feel comfortable providing positive references for you. If you

get a lukewarm or ambiguous response to this question, you are better off choosing someone else as a reference.

At the end of the day, you don't want that coveted offer rescinded due to someone's lackluster representation of you and your abilities. Choose references who are enthusiastic about you and happy to sing your praises to firms. If you have done so, you will be able to hand over your list of references with complete confidence.

Be Complete.

When providing your references to the firm, remember to include complete information. You will want to include the names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses of your references (if you confirmed with them in advance that it is okay to do so). If possible, also indicate better dates or times to reach your references. You don't want your job search held up by a game of "phone tag" between your references and the firm you are interviewing with.

It is also a good idea to send a confirmation email or to call your references right before you provide their information to a potential employer, as it is nice to remind them that they may be contacted in the near future. By doing so, you will prepare your references for their chat with the interviewing firm, and they will hopefully be able to eloquently describe your personality and professional strengths during that conversation.

Show Appreciation.

After someone has agreed to be your reference, remember to show appreciation to this person for taking time out of his or her busy schedule to help you. Send a thank-you card or a small gift to show your gratitude. Your job-search process may take longer than a few months, so it is quite possible that this attorney will have to field multiple phone calls as your reference.

A simple act of thoughtfulness on your part will help to recognize your references for their kindness and professional courtesy. It is also the polite and proper thing to do, so don't forget those thank-you cards.

I hope these tips are helpful to you and that all goes well in this final phase of your interview process. Good luck to you in your job search, and may all your references be good ones!

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