

## Who Should I Use As References?

When you are listing references, the first, most obvious choice is to use your immediate work provider.

I am sometimes surprised at how little thought goes into an attorney's reference list. I have spent a fair amount of time in my career checking attorney references, and have often asked myself, "Why in the world did this attorney list this individual as a reference?" I have had references tell me awful things about candidates, or, more often, give me limp, lukewarm endorsements. Here are some things to keep in mind when choosing individuals as references.

### 1. Can the individual speak to my skill set?

[When you are listing references, the first, most obvious choice is to use your immediate work provider.](#) (If this is not possible because you have had negative experiences with this person, please see Section 3, below). However, any work provider can serve as a reference.

Although a partner may be your main work provider, you may not be their main associate. You may well need to remind this person of the work you have done for them, especially if they are a reference from a former position, and it has been awhile. Please, please, do this. I suggest calling a former work provider rather than emailing, but you should probably follow up with an email, in which you can remind them of your role in significant projects performed for them. The last thing you want is for a reference-checker to be told by a reference that they can't remember what you did for them.

I have had people list non-work references such as pastors, non-legal business partners, even family members. I do not recommend this.

### 2. Does the individual like me, and are they enthusiastic about the work I produced?

References should glow. It is likely that the people who will check your references spend a fair amount of their day checking references. They know what to ask, and they know what to listen for. They immediately know the difference between someone who truly thinks you are spectacular and someone who is just going through the motions.

As discussed above, while you should use your main work provider if at all possible, you can use some judgment in your remaining references. Rather than using the most important or high-profile partners in your firm, I recommend using references who know you well, were very happy with your work, and will sing your praises to high heaven, even if that person is not someone who gets a lot of press. Again, people who check a lot of references are watching for this.

If one of your recommenders is a shy person, is very mellow, or just doesn't have a great phone personality, you may let the firm know this, as discreetly as possible, of course.

### 3. Generally speaking, you should avoid listing a person from whom you have had negative feedback more than once.

I get questions about this fairly regularly. I do not recommend listing someone who negatively critiqued your work on any significant level, or has responded unfavorably to your work more than once. Understand that firms may contact that person anyway; it is not hard for a firm to figure out who you were probably working for if you were in a particular group or serviced a particular client. However, again, the last thing you want is to provide a reference who may say negative things about you. Therefore, even if it means that you do not list

your main work provider, I would avoid listing someone who may say negative things about you. List other work providers, list work providers from past jobs who will glow when discussing you.

If you are on the fence about whether to list someone with whom you have had a questionable experience, simply....

#### 4. Ask a Potential Reference What They Might Say About You.

No one is perfect. It is certainly possible in life to recover from negative feedback and get a great reference from that person. If you are not sure whether you have truly recovered, you must find a way to ask before you list that person. I suggest simply asking the person if they are comfortable giving you a very positive reference. If they respond with some trepidation, I would think twice about using that person. The important thing is to get a true assessment of where you stand before you decide whether to list that person.