SESSION 8

Reference Checks

The last filter before you make the offer

Most reference checks are a waste of time because people ask the wrong questions. The right questions get answers referees did not plan to give.

— Business Maximiser Coaching

Why Most Reference Checks Fail

The Three Reasons Reference Checks Produce Useless Information

The Three Failure Modes

- They are conducted after the emotional commitment to hire has already been made
- They use closed questions that invite positive, rehearsed answers
- They speak to the wrong person — a referee chosen by the candidate to say good things

The Fix

- Run the reference check before the final decision, not after
- Use open, indirect questions that require the referee to think and reflect
- Ask for specific examples, not general assessments
- The silence and hesitation in a referee's answers tells you as much as the words

Never Ask These Questions. Ask These Instead.

Fair Work and Privacy Basics — Stay on the Right Side

Off-Limits Questions

- Age, date of birth, or anything that implies age discrimination
- Marital status, number of children, or family plans
- Disability, medical conditions, or health history
- Religion, political views, or national origin
- Salary at previous employer (in some circumstances)

Alternatives That Get the Same Information

- Availability and flexibility: 'Is there anything that would affect their ability to work a standard Monday to Friday schedule?'
- Reliability: 'How was their attendance and punctuality record?'
- Capacity: 'Were they able to meet the physical demands of the role?'
- Commitment: 'Did they complete projects through to the end?'

The Reference Call Script

Opening the Call

- **Applicant's Name / Supervisor / Phone Number:**
- Confirm these before you dial — have them written on your reference sheet
- **Once you've confirmed you're speaking to the right person, say:**
- "Your name has been given to me by [Applicant's Name] for a verbal reference. He/She has applied to work with us. May I ask you a few questions about [Applicant's Name]?"
- **Then move straight into the script:**
- Questions a) to l) follow, in order, on your reference sheet
- **At the end, say:**
- "Great, thanks very much for your time. That answers all of my questions about [Applicant's Name]. Bye for now."

The Reference Call — Questions a) to f)

a) What was the approximate period of employment?

b) And the duties?

c) And the reason for leaving?

d) Was the applicant honest?

e) And was the applicant always punctual?

f) And reliable?

→ Continue with questions g) to l) on the next slide

The Reference Call — Questions g) to l)

g)	Did the applicant have any sick days? If so, how much notice in advance of the rostered-on time was given?
h)	And did the applicant take any days off as holidays?
i)	Was the applicant ever late to work, or ever went home early?
j)	Would you re-employ them today? Why? A hesitant yes reveals almost as much as a no.
k)	How did you rank them as a team member — top, average, or bottom? The pause before the answer is as telling as the word itself.
l)	And what was the reason for being at this level? A vague answer is protective. A specific example is gold.
→	Then close: 'That answers all my questions. Thank you for your time.'

BLOCK 4

Reading Between the Lines

Questions j, k, and l — Why They Produce Honest Answers

"Would you re-employ this person if they applied for the same role today?"

This is a yes/no question that demands a commitment. Hesitation, qualification, or a conditional yes tells you everything. A referee who would not rehire them almost never says no outright.

"How would you rank them as a team member: top, average, or bottom?"

Putting a candidate in a ranked category is uncomfortable. The answer — and especially the pause before it — reveals the referee's honest assessment. Most people avoid saying 'bottom' even when they mean it.

"What was the reason they were at that level?"

This forces the referee to justify the ranking with specifics. Listen for the example they choose. Vague answers mean the referee is being protective. Specific answers are gold.

What the Subtext Tells You

- **Long pause before answering:**
- The referee is choosing their words carefully — they have something to say but are deciding how much to reveal
- **Overly enthusiastic praise with no examples:**
- The referee is providing a social reference, not a professional one — they want to help the candidate, not give you useful data
- **Very short answers:**
- The referee does not want to be on this call — they agreed as a favour but have reservations
- **Qualifies the yes — 'I would probably re-hire them for the right role':**
- This is a conditional endorsement — find out what the right role is and compare it to yours

WORKSHOP ACTIVITY

Practise the Reference Call

Pairs exercise:

1. Review your printed reference sheet, questions a) to l)
2. Identify the two questions you would most likely skip — and why
3. Partner A plays the referee, Partner B conducts the reference call using the full script
4. After the call: what did you learn? What hesitation did you notice?
5. Swap roles and run a second scenario

20 minutes

KEY TAKEAWAY

A properly conducted reference check is not a box-tick — it is the last piece of evidence before you commit. Run it before you decide, not to confirm a decision you have already made.

NEXT SESSION

Session 9 — Induction Plan and Setting Them Up to Win