

REFERENCES

Career Skills Handout Series

At the beginning of your job search, prepare a list of references. Submit it when employers ask for it. Whether or not a reference list is required as part of your initial application, take it to interviews. Offer it to interviewers if you decide references are likely to strengthen your candidacy. Legal employers want *professional* references. In your earlier experience with nonlegal jobs, employers may have been happy with character references: family friends, clergy, even your peers. Legal employers, however, want references who can vouch for your legal skills. Generally legal employers ascribe more credibility to lawyers than to nonlawyers. As early as possible in law school, switch from undergraduate professors and nonlegal supervisors to lawyers.

Especially if you have little or no practical legal experience, cultivate one or two professors to act as references. First-year legal research and writing professors are logical choices, because (1) they often know their students better than professors teaching large, survey courses, and (2) employers hiring law students place a premium on research and writing skills. Although law professors who don't personally know you may be willing to be references, they can't be as helpful as references who don't have to qualify their comments with, "I don't really know this student, but she did well on my exams." Such a reference is as sterile as a transcript. Whether you use a professor or two, include supervisors. When you rely on particular work experience as qualifying you for a prospective position, and you don't provide a reference from that experience, you raise a red flag.

You need three references, unless otherwise specified by the employer. Choose people with whom you have a current or recent relationship. Memories fade over time and references from years ago lose the specifics that are so valuable in persuasively supporting your candidacy. Quality references are substantive, not superficial. Make it easy for your references to help you. Never list people as references without asking them. When caught cold by an employer, references can't be as helpful as when they are expecting calls. Tell your references what kinds of positions you're applying for. To refresh their recollection, give your references your resume and a synopsis of the work you did for them.

Your challenge as an applicant is to convince prospective employers you are among the candidates best able to do the kind of work the employers' law clerks—or lawyers—do. The most persuasive references are people doing the same thing the employer is doing. Approximate as best you can. You want to prosecute and you haven't worked for a prosecutor, can you use your criminal law professor or a current or former criminal defense lawyer? Legal employers—and certainly judges, when you are applying for a judicial clerkship—like to see judges included among your references. At your earliest opportunity upon appearing in court—whether as a certified law student or as an attorney—cultivate a judge or two as references. Of course, sometimes someone is a good reference simply because he or she is influential with the employer. When you've got such contacts, use them.

Although you want to try to match references with employers, it is important to choose people who know your work first-hand and can meaningfully talk about you. Your direct supervisor—seemingly an obvious choice—in a given instance, may not be the best person to ask for a reference. When supervisors are not people with whom you enjoy strong rapport, and especially when they are churlish or disorganized, look for someone else. A better choice could be an attorney—even though outside your chain of supervision—who has been generous in praise of your work and who you are confident would extol your virtues. When your references vouch for you, employers weigh three things: whether your reference is in a position to assess the qualities the employer thinks are important; whether your reference makes a strong pitch; and whether your reference is credible: experienced, objective, and well-spoken.

It is OK to tell prospective employers that you don't want them to contact your current or former employers until the last step before an offer. It is not OK to expect an employer to make an offer without contacting references. Do not state, "References Available Upon Request" on your resume; that's understood. Do references make a difference? Yes. Although references say nothing but positive things, experienced hiring attorneys are used to reading between the lines and can easily discern strong from unenthusiastic support. Be strategic to help your references help you.

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REFERENCES

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[If reference has moved since supervising you, note former employer]
Relationship

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