

# The importance of reference checks

 By [Niteske Marshall](#)

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Recruitment is becoming an increasingly risky business. There's been a disturbing increase in deceitful behaviour by job seekers and this can be linked to high levels of unemployment, heightened competition for jobs and an apparent decline in levels of honesty amongst the general population.



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Employers and recruiters are desperate not to make the wrong choices when it comes to hiring staff - particularly in today's challenging business environment - but it's becoming more and more difficult.

Reference checking has historically been a reliable safety net in mitigating the risks, but several recent high-profile appointments involving false qualifications and fake references highlight what has become a significant problem. But dishonesty issues aren't confined to South Africa, as shown by a recent survey from Balance Recruitment in Australia, which found that 39% of job applicants admitted to using friends as references.

There are various dishonest and fraudulent practices associated with reference checks, including the submission of false letters of recommendation or where friends or relatives pose as previous supervisors. These 'managers' then act as referees who give false positive testimonials and/or confirm employment that never happened. This growth in fraudulent behaviour is highlighted by the fact that there is even a US-based company that will provide false references for a fee. And that's the truth!

## Act quickly

A strong response to this scourge is required. Managers responsible for hiring staff and recruitment agencies must act quickly and should be applying new rules and methods of checking references if they are to meet the challenge head on.

Strange as it sounds, even if an employer dismisses an employee because he discovers that a reference was falsified, he may not be favoured by the labour laws if the proper hiring processes weren't followed. All job applicants should be required to sign an application form that states that a condition of employment is the completion of successful reference checks and that any false information in this regard could be used as grounds for termination.

Recruiters should never rely on written references. Telephonic references are a must - and should be done using a land line and not a cellphone, in order to have the correct name of the business and the job title of the referee confirmed by the switchboard operator or receptionist.

Even though HR managers of a candidate's previous employers may not be named as referees, they can - and should be - contacted to confirm the applicant's job title, reporting structure and duration of employment. Act on instinct. If there is anything in a character reference that doesn't ring true, always look for a second layer of confirmation.

When following up with a referee, ensure that you have a comprehensive set of questions that probe beyond the superficial. Specific questions and a thorough discussion should reveal whether a referee did in fact work closely (if at all) with a job applicant.

It's also vital to investigate a candidate's social media profiles. Check if his job history and job titles as described on LinkedIn or other sites match what's on his CV. Also, it's important to ensure that the referees provided on the various sites are consistent and always double check if you suspect any misrepresentation. Deceptive behaviour is on the rise and employers and recruiters need to make sure they're safe - otherwise they'll be very sorry.

## ABOUT NITESKE MARSHALL

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