

Check your references!

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Written or verbal references are virtually useless as a tool for would-be employers, unless heavily contextualized, says executive headhunter Debbie Goodman.

Goodman, Managing Director of Jack Hammer Executive Headhunters says, "Employees with the most glowing references can turn out to be complete disasters — it all depends on who gives the reference, and the context of their comments.

"In some instances when employment is terminated, an agreement may be struck whereby the employer provides a positive reference as a means of getting rid of a problem employee at short notice.

"On the other hand, legitimate references can be extremely subjective, and the candidate will obviously always put forward referees who will only say positive things about them.

Goodman adds that many large companies refuse to provide references on past employees, because of possible legal implications should their reference be the reason for the job seeker not being appointed.

"By law, employers need only provide a certificate of employment when an employee leaves. The employer is under no obligation to provide any kind of written or verbal reference, and in some cases specify only the dates an employee worked for their organisation, opting often not to comment on performance.

Better to focus on facts

"As a result, one cannot place too much stead on testimonials or references as these are either subjective, or provide no performance-related information at all. So, the best a new prospective employer can do is to verify the candidate's qualifications, achievements and work history stated on their CV.

"By confirming that a candidate was, for example, the top achiever in their MBA class, leaves no room for discrepancy, this is fact. The only things you can be 100 percent sure about are the facts — non-subjective information."

According to the Sunday Times in London, studies have shown that 'peer-ratings' of ability, motivation and style are also among the most successful methods of getting to know the true colours of a prospective candidate.

Peer review more accurate

The boss — or most senior person, often the one chosen to provide the reference — knows the consequences or the 'product' of a person's work. But that person's peers generally know their abilities and motives and their subordinates are the best people to testify as to their work style.

"Only by interviewing all of these people can one get a real picture of the individual — although this is time consuming and obviously not always possible."

Goodman says that headhunters make it their business to stay on the corporate pulse, building relationships within industry sectors that will allow them to remain well-informed about the key players.

"When sourcing candidates for a position, apart from verifying qualifications and conducting the usual checks, it is our job to dig deeper into the candidate's track record by accessing these contacts.

"A few informal questions to former colleagues can often reveal the most about a candidate's ability and, although these peers may be competitors, they can often provide excellent insight.

"When placing top candidates, a wrong choice can end up costing a company hundreds of thousands of rands, so this part of the headhunting process is crucial.

Goodman says that headhunters generally know the questions to ask when short listing candidates to reveal the full extent of their expertise and knowledge and they are often able to decipher any deeper meaning that may lurk in a candidate's responses.