A REFERENCE FOR HIRING AND BACKGROUND CHECKS

Five rules for reference checks

What a new study on referee bias teaches anyone who hires or runs background checks.

In eight experiments with more than 1,700 managers in the United States and the United Kingdom, managers gave employees higher ratings when they provided a reference for a prospective employer than when they evaluated the same employees internally, typically by 0.3 to 0.4 points on a five-point scale. They also reported fewer problem behaviors. The researchers found support for an explanation they call Vicarious Self-Promotion: the manager sees the employee's success as a reflection of their own management ability, and a positive reference also improves the impression the manager makes.[1]

4.34
Mean performance rating, no instruction to the referee

3.95
After an instruction to think like the hiring manager

In the final experiment the mean rating fell by 0.39 points, and reports of problem behaviors became more candid. An instruction to take the candidate's perspective did not change the ratings.[1]

The five rules

1. **A reference is not an objective source of information.** It may also reflect the referee's interests and self-image, not only the candidate's performance.
2. **Behavioral questions and concrete examples.** Prefer focused behavioral questions and ask for examples, instead of settling for ratings and general assessments. In the study, the bias was measured in numerical ratings.[1]
3. **Ask the referee to think like the hiring manager.** Stress that a balanced picture matters more than a positive reference. This is the intervention tested in the final experiment, and it lowered the ratings. Suggested wording in the box below.
4. **Cross-check with independent sources.** Verification of employment history, OSINT-based background checks and other information sources, subject to the law and to relevance to the role.
5. **No negative information is not the same as no risk.** Do not conclude from a reference without negative information that there are no risks, and do not treat a positive reference on its own as sufficient evidence of the candidate's trustworthiness. In the study, managers reported fewer problem behaviors in references than in the internal evaluation.[1]

Suggested wording for the request to the referee

"Before you answer, please think of yourself as the person responsible for deciding whether to hire this candidate: what information would you want to receive, including information that might raise concerns? A balanced picture will help us more than a positive reference alone."

The wording is based on the instruction tested in the final experiment of the study.[1] It is this document's adaptation, not wording published in the study.

The caveat

The findings are based on controlled experiments and simulated reference checks. They do not establish how large the bias is in real hiring, nor that the lower ratings are more accurate. Only the instruction in rule 3 was tested directly in an experiment. The other rules are professional conclusions derived from the findings.

The full article in the Knowledge Hub: **profcheck.co/knowledge/reference-check-bias-vicarious-self-promotion**

Sources

1. "New Ellis research reveals a bias in employee reference checks", University of New Mexico Newsroom, 24 November 2026. news.unm.edu/news/new-ellis-research-reveals-a-bias-in-employee-reference-checks
2. Jacobson, K., Jacobson, R. & Holmberg, C.-J., "'We' Are High Performers: Vicarious Self-Promotion Underlies Managers' Leniency in Online Reference Checks", International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 2026. doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.70072 Kathryn Jacobson and Ryan Jacobson are at the University of New Mexico. Carl-Johan Holmberg is at Refapp, a Swedish company specializing in online reference checks.