

How to empower your reference checking process with a scientific approach

Reference checking is one of the most widely used methods in personnel selection. Although popular, traditional reference checks suffer from low validity and biases. In this white paper, we demonstrate how new technology and new scientific findings can mitigate these biases and significantly increase the validity of your reference checks.

The challenges of traditional reference checks

Perhaps the most important purpose of a personnel selection method is to predict how a candidate will perform at work. The accuracy with which a selection method can predict such an outcome is called predictive validity. Studies have shown that the predictive validity of traditional reference checks is low (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). This evidence should caution against the continued reliance on traditional reference checks.

Not only are traditional reference checks characterised by low validity. They also suffer from biases. Several studies (e.g., Madera et al., 2019; Schmader et al., 2007) have shown that referees tend to describe male candidates more positively than female candidates. This gender bias is believed to contribute to women being underrepresented in certain areas of the labour market (Llorens et al., 2021; Madera et al., 2019; Tavaréz et al., 2022).

The importance of third party data

Reference checking is usually the only personnel selection procedure where the information about the candidates comes from someone other than the candidates themselves.

Collecting third party data is important because the candidates are not always honest during the recruitment process. For example, studies have shown that 81% of candidates lie during the job interview (Weiss & Feldman, 2006), and 72% of candidates embellish information on their resumes (Zvi & Shtudiner, 2021). Therefore, it is important to collect information from additional sources than the candidates themselves.



How to improve the quality of your reference checks

So, how can you actually collect valuable third party data through a process that is plagued with biases and low validity? New research shows that biases can be mitigated and validity increased by adding structure to the reference check (Fisher et al., 2022; Hedricks et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2010). Below are some tips on what you can do to increase the quality of your reference checks:

- ✓ **Start with a thorough job analysis**
If you do not base your questions on a job analysis, there is a risk that the information you collect about the candidates is irrelevant.
- ✓ **Use questions that are recommended by scientists**
Studies have shown that in reference checking, the best type of questions are work-related behavioural questions.
- ✓ **Use standardised scoring scales**
As mentioned above, referees tend to describe male candidates more positively than female candidates. However, when the candidates are scored on standardised numerical scales, the gender of the candidate does not seem to affect the rating.
- ✓ **Collect data from several referees**
The more referees you use, the more reliable data you will get. Also, do not stop at asking the candidate for a certain number of referees. You should also set requirements for the type of referees you want.
- ✓ **Verify the identity of the referees**
As mentioned above, candidates are willing to lie to get a job. This also goes for reference checks. There are many examples where recruiters have spoken on the phone with someone they believed was a former manager of the candidate, but turned out to be a completely different person.

Why Refapp?

Refapp is a web-based tool that facilitates structured reference checks while also ensuring GDPR compliance.

Based on scientific job analyses, we provide a library of questionnaires for different occupations. The data from the referees is collected in a standardised way and compiled into reports so that you can easily compare the candidates.

As we continuously update our service based on the latest scientific findings, you can feel confident that you are getting the most relevant insights from your reference checks. Our technological innovation allows you to collect data from - and verify the identity of - multiple referees in an automatic and time-efficient manner.

QUESTION 11 OF 45

Peter always completes tasks started

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

☐ I cannot answer the question

QUESTION 12 OF 45

Peter accomplishes the work on time

1 2 3 4 5

< >

References

- Fisher, P. A., Robie, C., Hedricks, C. A., Rupayana, D. D., & Puchalski, L. (2022). Little cause for concern: analysis of gender effects in structured employment references. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 30(3), 361-377.
- Hedricks, C. A., Robie, C., & Oswald, F. L. (2013). Web-based multisource reference checking: An investigation of psychometric integrity and applied benefits. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 21(1), 99-110.
- Llorens, A., Tzovara, A., Bellier, L., Bhaya-Grossman, I., Bidet-Caulet, A., Chang, W. K., ... & Dronkers, N. F. (2021). Gender bias in academia: A lifetime problem that needs solutions. *Neuron*, 109(13), 2047-2074.
- Madera, J. M., Hebl, M. R., Dial, H., Martin, R., & Valian, V. (2019). Raising doubt in letters of recommendation for academia: Gender differences and their impact. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 34, 287-303.
- Schmader, T., Whitehead, J., & Wysocki, V. H. (2007). A linguistic comparison of letters of recommendation for male and female chemistry and biochemistry job applicants. *Sex Roles*, 57(7), 509-514.
- Schmidt, F. L., & Hunter, J. E. (1998). The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 262-274.
- Tavarez, M. M., Baghdassarian, A., Bailey, J., Caglar, D., Eckerle, M., Fang, A., ... & Langan, M. L. (2022). A call to action for standardizing letters of recommendation. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 14(6), 642-646.
- Taylor, P. J., Pajo, K., Cheung, G. W., & Stringfield, P. (2004). Dimensionality and validity of a structured telephone reference check procedure. *Personnel Psychology*, 57(3), 745-772.
- Weiss, B., & Feldman, R. S. (2006). Looking good and lying to do it: Deception as an impression management strategy in job interviews. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(4), 1070-1086.
- Zimmerman, R. D., Triana, M. D. C., & Barrick, M. R. (2010). Predictive criterion-related validity of observer ratings of personality and job-related competencies using multiple raters and multiple performance criteria. *Human Performance*, 23(4), 361-378.
- Zvi, L., & Shtudiner, Z. (2021). Resume fraud and counterproductive behavior: The impact of narcissism in the labor market. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*, 93.