Copier Careers®

Why Neglecting Reference Checks Can Come Back to Haunt You

By Scott Cullen

In a rush to fill positions, office technology dealerships often overlook one of the simplest ways to reduce the risk of a costly hiring mistake.

In many office technology dealerships, the hiring process moves quickly out of necessity. A service department needs a technician yesterday. A sales territory has been uncovered for weeks. An unfilled admin position is piling extra work on everyone else. After several rounds of interviews, managers often reach the point where they simply want to hire someone and move on.

That urgency helps explain why reference checks are often treated as an afterthought or skipped entirely.

According to Copier Careers recruiters, many employers assume references are pointless because "no one gives a bad reference anymore," while others believe former employers will only confirm employment dates to avoid legal liability. As a result, many hiring managers skip the reference-checking process entirely. One recruiter noted that despite serving as a reference for several friends and former coworkers over the past 15 years, they have never once been contacted.

Organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) continue to emphasize that reference checks remain an important part of the hiring process because they help verify information, identify potential concerns, and reduce the risk of a poor hire.

Although reference checks may not always yield dramatic revelations, experienced recruiters say they often provide valuable clues that interviews alone can miss.

The “No One Gives Bad References” Myth

One of the biggest misconceptions about reference checks is that they never reveal anything useful. But Copier Careers recruiters say that assumption often stems from employers rarely making the calls. The logic usually goes like this: “No one would give a bad reference anyway.”

That notion can be dangerous when paired with another reality: candidates know that many employers skip references altogether. Recruiters note that some candidates may rely on that lack of follow-up, listing weak or even bad references because they assume no one will call.

However, even a brief reference call can yield useful information. Sometimes it is direct. Sometimes it is subtle. A former manager may sound hesitant. Responses may become vague or carefully worded. A reference may emphasize attendance or friendliness while avoiding any discussion of performance. Occasionally, a former employer may be far more candid than expected.

Copier Careers recruiters estimate that, perhaps 5% to 10% of the time, employers receive far more honesty from references than conventional wisdom would suggest. Avoiding even one disastrous hire can justify the effort.

Even "Limited" References Have Value

Some employers argue that because many companies only verify employment dates, there is little reason to bother. But even limited verification has value.

According to an Indeed blog post, reference checks help employers confirm that candidates accurately represented their work history, responsibilities, and experience. That may seem basic, but recruiters say inconsistencies are more common than many employers realize.

Employment dates suddenly become unclear. Titles become inflated. Responsibilities grow dramatically compared with those reported by former employers. Occasionally, the employer discovers something even more troubling.

Five Hiring Verifications Worth Completing Before You Make the Offer

1. Corroborated employment dates
2. Spoken with at least one former supervisor
3. Confirmed key responsibilities listed on the resume
4. Asked whether the reference would rehire the candidate
5. Resolved any inconsistencies discovered during the interview process

These steps take relatively little time but can prevent months of frustration after the hire.

While certainly not the norm, Copier Careers recruiters do occasionally encounter questionable references. If a hiring manager calls a reference and quickly suspects the caller is a friend posing as a supervisor, that alone reveals important information about the candidate's honesty and judgment.

Even a generic HR verification at least confirms that the employer is legitimate and that the candidate actually worked there. That may not sound compelling, but it is still meaningful due diligence.

Treat Hiring Like You Expect Employees to Treat Their Jobs

Copier Careers recruiters often compare reference checks to sales prospecting. What percentage of cold calls result in immediate success? Most salespeople know the answer is low. Yet dealerships still expect sales reps to make those calls consistently, believing that enough opportunities will eventually emerge to justify the effort.

Hiring deserves the same mindset. Would a dealership owner accept a salesperson saying, "There's no point in cold calling because no one buys from cold calls"? Probably not. Yet some employers use almost identical logic when they skip reference checks, assuming they won't learn anything useful about the candidate.

Employers benefit when they approach hiring with the same diligence and consistency that they expect of employees in their own roles. Not every reference call will uncover something important. Most won't. But hiring decisions deserve the same diligence and consistency employers expect from their employees.

The Biggest Mistakes Often Surface After the Hire

Perhaps the strongest argument for reference checks comes from what happens when employers skip them altogether. Recruiters across many industries can share stories of employers who call references only after a new hire has already begun causing problems. In some cases, those stories come from Copier Careers clients describing a bad hiring experience that ultimately led them to seek outside recruiting assistance.

Maybe the new hire is behaving erratically. Perhaps coworkers are uncomfortable. Customer complaints begin to surface. Deadlines are missed. Service calls are mishandled. Sales promises create operational chaos. Only then does management decide to investigate further.

Former employers who might have been cautious before the hire are often far more willing to discuss their experiences once the new employer is already dealing with the consequences. Unfortunately, by then, the damage has already begun.

The dealership has invested in onboarding time, training costs, management attention, payroll expenses, and customer exposure for the employee. Coworkers may already be frustrated, and customers may already be questioning service quality. The situation is far more costly than a few missed phone calls.

SHRM has noted that employment verification and reference checks can help protect employers from negligent hiring risks and safeguard the substantial investment companies make in new employees. Indeed, a rushed hiring decision can create problems that extend well beyond reduced productivity.

Why Reference Checks are Useful in the Office Technology Industry

In many industries, weak employees can hide behind layers of supervision. In the office technology channel, that is often not the case. Service technicians regularly work alone at customer sites, and sales representatives operate independently across their territories. Remote and hybrid work arrangements mean managers may not see employees face-to-face every day. That makes character, accountability, communication skills, and professionalism especially important.

A technician with poor customer skills can damage customer relationships, while a sales rep who oversells capabilities can create long-term service headaches. Even administrative hires can disrupt critical workflows if they lack reliability.

Reference checks help employers gain insight into how candidates actually performed in real workplace environments, not simply how well they interview. And interviews, by nature, are performances.

Candidates naturally present their strongest selves. That is understandable. But recruiters emphasize that references offer a different perspective: how the candidate behaved after the interview process ended and real work began.

Asking Better Questions

Another reason some reference checks fail is that employers ask questions that almost guarantee generic answers. Questions such as “Was this person a good employee?” or “Would you recommend them?” rarely elicit meaningful discussion.

SHRM and other hiring organizations recommend using open-ended, behavioral questions instead.

For example:

- How did this employee handle difficult customers?
- What type of supervision worked best with them?
- How did they respond to feedback or coaching?
- What were their biggest strengths?
- Where did they struggle?
- How reliable were they in terms of attendance and follow-through?
- Would you enthusiastically hire them again?

These questions often produce more nuanced and useful responses.

Employers may also want to ask questions that focus on the specific role. Service managers may ask about troubleshooting skills and customer communication. Sales managers may ask about prospecting habits, honesty with customers, and long-term account management.

A Small Investment That Can Prevent a Big Problem

A quick phone call can confirm facts, expose inconsistencies, reveal warning signs, or strengthen confidence in a hiring decision. Occasionally, it can prevent a dealership from making an extremely costly mistake. That possibility alone makes the effort worthwhile.

The fact that organizations such as SHRM and Indeed continue to advocate for reference checks underscores that this is not a challenge unique to the office technology channel. Employers in virtually every industry face the same temptation to skip a step that can help prevent costly hiring mistakes.

In any industry where a single poor hire can affect customers, coworkers, morale, service quality, and profitability, spending a few minutes on reference checks is a small investment that can pay significant dividends.