

## Honest Reference Letters Can Help Open Doors

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



At some time in your life, you may be asked to write a letter of reference for a family member, friend or colleague seeking a new job.

Among the likely scenarios: Your co-worker has been laid off. He or she is frantically looking for a new job and comes to you for help. What should you do?

Regrettably in this recession-plagued economy, this scenario is all too common. Layoffs have displaced millions of workers nationwide. Even highly skilled workers scramble for months to find new jobs.

Thankfully we are gradually seeing some signs of recovery. One of my clients recently hired 10 new employees. However, employers are cautioned not to get so caught up in the excitement of hiring that they forget to do their homework.

An employer must do “due diligence” in the entire hiring process ... and that includes the validity of a reference letter. It's important not to take what is said at face value in a reference letter, but to follow-up with personal contacts. After all, with today's technology, anyone can create letterhead, put a few flowery comments on paper, sign and submit it as real!

A reference letter can be a useful “stepping off point”, though, in a careful hiring process. And as such, it is important for jobseekers to obtain references from people who can provide honest and relevant information about their job performance and skills.

For the purpose of this column, I will assume the reader has been asked to write a reference letter for a valued co-worker, and has direct knowledge about the co-worker's skills and work history.

Some tips:

- Understand the job or career path your co-worker is pursuing. Discuss with your co-worker the skills required for the job and the motivation for seeking it. How does the desired job compare to the previous ones?
- Understand your co-worker's strengths and weaknesses.
- Organize your letter, including how you know the applicant and how you can testify to attributes. Include an example of a shared project.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the job being sought and what you believe the applicant will bring to it.
- Focus your letter on the specific job. Send the letter directly to the prospective employers, if possible. A “to whom it may concern” letter attached by a jobseeker will not carry as much weight.
- Be prepared to be called by the prospective employer and asked to discuss the recommendation. Be honest in both the letter and the discussion.
- Pick your words carefully.

As an example of the power of words, consider a study conducted by researchers at Rice University in Texas. In an article last month in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, researchers reported subtle word choices in reference letters had profound impact on hiring and promotion.

They reviewed 624 letters of recommendation from 194 applicants for eight junior faculty positions at a U.S. university. The qualities mentioned in recommendation letters for women differed sharply from those for men. The differences hurt women's chances of being hired or promoted.

When describing female applicants, reference letters often used adjectives such as affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, nurturing, tactful and agreeable, and described behaviors as helping others, taking direction well and maintaining relationships. Male applicants often were described as confident, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, daring, outspoken and intellectual, with behaviors such as speaking assertively, influencing others and initiating tasks.

The "pipeline shortage" of women in academia is a well-known and researched phenomenon, but this study was the first of its kind to examine the role of recommendation letters.

"This research not only has important implications for women in academia, but also for women in management and leadership roles," said the study's co-author, professor Michelle Hebl, in a Rice University news release about the study.

While reference letters are often not the "deciding factor" in hiring, if written correctly by people with knowledge and honesty, they can be the push that helps open the door.

Jim Collins, the author of "Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't," likens the workplace to a bus, and stresses the need for having the right people on the bus, *and* the right people in the right seats on the bus.

Conscientious employers who follow thorough hiring procedures, applicants who honestly present their skills, and people who serve as references are critical to assuring the right people *are* in the right seats for every organization.

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