

September 23, 1999

# REFERENCE CHECKS: HOW THE GAME HAS CHANGED

## Most Candidates Now Interview While They Still Have Jobs

(Philadelphia, PA) -- It used to be that reference checks were a fairly straightforward part of the process of getting a new job. Candidates, if they passed the scrutiny of the interviewing process, submitted the name of their supervisor at their previous job and a quick phone call to verify employment was a formality.

Today, the reference check is vastly more complicated, both from the point of view of the candidate and the prospective employer, according to Patrick Sylvester of Management Recruiters of Cherry Hill, a network associate of Management Recruiters International (MRI), Inc., the nation's largest executive search and recruitment organization, and a subsidiary of Philadelphia-based CDI Corp. To start with, most candidates today are interviewing clandestinely while they still have a job, foreclosing the possibility of checking with their current supervisor for verification of employment details.

The growing prevalence of the employed looking for jobs rather than the unemployed has brought broad changes in the dynamics of reference checks and in the way they are conducted.

Two major shifts in reference checking have come about. First, with recruiters doing vastly more of the checking, reference checks are becoming more systematic and standardized. Checks catch more inconsistencies and red flags in a candidate's story. But the effect of a single bad reference can more easily be mitigated as multiple references are weighed against each other. Second, a much more diverse group of references has become acceptable--even desirable--to recruiters and employers than ever before.

"With the tremendous growth in a continuing strong job market, qualified and highly skilled professionals remain at a premium. Employers today are looking for the best, most accurate reference check they can find. Simply put, companies cannot afford to hire the wrong person for a high profile position because the competition is so intense. The reference becomes vitally important, yet with negligible unemployment in many fields, the overwhelming majority of job candidates are working at their current job while interviewing. This trend will no doubt continue indefinitely and poses a significant problem for prospective employers," said Patrick Sylvester, a partner at Management Recruiters of Cherry Hill. "When you can't talk to a candidate's current employer because he or she is still working there, you've got to get creative if you're going to uncover the strengths and weaknesses that candidate will bring to a new job," continued Sylvester. "Yes, you can always go back to the employer before the one where the candidate now works, but there are other alternatives."

Among the most productive references candidates can give, Sylvester cites:

- o Co-workers who may not speak officially for the company, but can speak from personal experience.
  
- o Business contacts outside the candidate's current company who have worked closely with the candidate, such as clients or customers, joint venture or project partners, and in some cases vendors.

- o A candidate's former employer who has left the company, but can stress the candidate's importance within the workplace.

- o Colleagues from professional associations or other entities where the candidate's professional skills and performance might be known or evaluated.

"In general, we never look for the 'perfect' reference -- incredibly glowing references are either exaggerated or refer to generalities rather than specific examples of real performance," added Sylvester. "It's most important for us to determine a candidate's potential cultural fit with a company. For example, if leadership ability is a particularly sought after skill, for instance, we look to elicit very specific examples during our reference check of how a candidate has used team-building skills to create focus, drive results and energize others to initiate real change within an organization."

Management Recruiters of Cherry Hill has been named "MRI Office of the Year" for the past seven consecutive years. The firm currently has over 30 full-time recruiting professionals in the fields of Logistics, Supply Chain, Retail, Customer Service, Finance, Manufacturing, Transportation, Information Technology and Human Resources. Many of its major placement assignments have come from such leading American corporations as Campbell's, First USA, Energizer, Citibank and Deloitte & Touche. In 1998, the firm placed over 275 candidates in a variety of management and professional positions.

Management Recruiters International, Inc. ([www.brilliantpeople.com](http://www.brilliantpeople.com)), is the world's largest search and recruitment organization with nearly 800 offices worldwide. Based in Cleveland, MRI has systemwide billings of nearly \$475 million and places 34,000 people in jobs annually. MRI is a subsidiary of Philadelphia-based CDI Corp. ([www.cdicorp.com](http://www.cdicorp.com)). CDI increases the productivity and competitiveness of its Fortune 1000 customer base through customized technical, information technology, professional and administrative staffing and outsourcing solutions. CDI revenues totaled \$1.54 billion in 1998.

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