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How To Put References in a Resume

It's easy: you don't!

By Kristina Cowan

How do you put references in a resume? Listing references in a resume is akin to combining oil and water-the two mix well, experts say. They offer various reasons for not doing so, and say sharing references isn't something you do when first applying; it's what you do when you're a serious contender for a job.

Career experts Laura DeCarlo, Anna Ivey, Bernadette Kenny and Deborah DeCamp weigh in on this and offer advice for the most popular questions about reference lists for resumes: Should you put references on your resume? What should you use as references on your resume? What is the proper format for reference page of a resume? How many references should you have on a resume?

Should you put references on your resume?

No references on your resume. Experts agree: keep references off your resume, and don't waste space with phrases such as "References available on request"-that's a given. DeCarlo, executive director of Career Directors International in Melbourne, Fla., said you could disqualify yourself by putting references on the resume you send in with your application. Some companies may toss such resumes, she said, for fear of being penalized during auditing procedures. If a company has some resumes with references and others without, it could mean trouble, she said. DeCarlo points out that the first week of May is International Update Your References Week, a nationally registered holiday launched by CDI and now in its fifth year. References belong on a separate resume reference page.

Who should you use as references on your resume?

Select individuals who know you well. DeCarlo said a good rule of thumb for a reference is "someone who can tell how you are professionally in the workplace, and ideally those are former bosses." Ivey cautioned against selecting references just because they have impressive titles but don't know you well. A seasoned recruiter will "see right through that," Ivey said.

Tailor your references to the job. DeCamp, a Chicago-based regional director for Manpower Professional, said it's important to select different references to speak to your different skill sets, and use them according to the job you are pursuing. For example, have one reference who can talk about your ability to work on a team, another who can talk to your stellar capacity for sales, and someone who'll vouch for your tenacity.

Avoid personal references. It's best not to list your personal physician or pastor as references, experts say. Doing so puts the employer in an awkward spot and sends the wrong signal about you—that you don't have people to objectively speak to your professional past.

Stay in touch with your references. It's important to talk to your references before you submit their names to a potential employer, experts say. Ivey, a career counselor based in the Boston area, said it's best to get assurance from an individual that he or she is comfortable speaking on your behalf. If he or she has reservations for some reason, it's better for you to hear about them than a potential employer, she said. Also, be sure you have your references' current contact information.

What is the proper format for your reference list? How many references should you include?

Keep your reference list format to two or three references. "Three is what most companies are looking for," DeCarlo said. Listing more references than that doesn't necessarily give you a leg up, she said, and listing too many names can overwhelm an employer. A format for a reference page of a resume should be clean and simple.

Be selective. In handing over references, DeCamp said, remember you're interviewing the employer as much as the employer is interviewing you. Collect information from the employer first, so you can target who your references will be, she said.

Further tips for resume reference pages.

Expect the unexpected. "References will be done on you without your ever knowing it. Everyone knows everybody nowadays, so if I want to check you out I will e-mail somebody asking for their opinion of you and I'll never tell you about that," said Kenny, the Melville, Long Island-based chief career officer at Adecco Group North America. Resume reference pages may be used at any point in the interview process.

Respect your references! Be aware that your references are sacrificing time and effort to help you.

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