

Guide to Giving Employment References

General Statement

It is the aim of Cornell University to support and assist current and former employees in their efforts to secure new positions either within or outside of the university. To that end, the university encourages employees who are contacted for an employment reference to openly and honestly participate in the process, in keeping with the information contained in this document.

Purpose

The purpose of the information that follows is to provide guidance to those involved in the reference checking process on the:

- various types of reference checks
- expectations of staff seeking new positions
- responsibilities/expectations for faculty and staff asked to serve as a reference
- guidelines to follow when participating in the reference-checking process

The purpose of conducting an employment reference is to obtain information related to the skills, strengths, weaknesses and overall performance of the job seeker in order to make a more informed hiring decision.

Note: New York State Law protects a current or former employer when they provide truthful information (i.e., facts not opinions) about an employee's job performance to someone who is in the position to make an employment decision regarding that employee.

For more details, you may either scroll through the information that follows or click on one of the links below to be taken directly to a particular section of this text

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Types of References

Please refer to the guidelines section of this document prior to providing any reference.

Internal Reference

An internal reference check occurs when a current University hiring supervisor/manager requests an employment reference from another current University employee for an applicant seeking employment within the university.

When a current or former employee of the university is seeking employment **within** the university, current Cornell staff and faculty with direct knowledge of the applicant's employment skills and history may be contacted for an employment reference. Those individuals may include the applicant's:

- prior or current university supervisor(s)

- prior or current university co-worker(s)
- other university faculty or staff with whom the applicant has worked and who could speak to the employment skills of the applicant.

As Cornell is considered from the legal standpoint to be one single employer, it is expected that hiring managers will contact other current university staff or faculty members, *including the applicant's current university supervisor*, who have direct knowledge of the applicant's job-related skills, even though these people may not be specifically listed by the applicant.

Note: Prior to making an offer to a current Cornell employee, you may ask that employee to state his or her current rate of pay/salary. As part of developing an offer, the local human resource representative for the college/unit in which the opening resides may contact the local human resource representative in the college/unit in which the employee currently works to discuss current salary and review the salary history.

External Reference

An external reference check occurs when a representative from a non-Cornell employer requests an employment reference from a current university employee for an applicant seeking employment outside the university.

When a current or former employee of the university is seeking employment **outside** of the university, Cornell staff and faculty with direct knowledge of the applicant's employment skills and history may be contacted for an employment reference. While the university encourages participation in external reference checks, such participation is not required.

Written Reference Requests

Some external employers' reference-check process may include written reference checks. Assuming you have agreed to serve as a reference for an employee seeking other employment, as you complete the written response, it is important to follow the same guidelines as you would when responding to an oral request. If you receive a written request for someone for whom you did not agree to serve as a reference, you may opt not to respond. If you receive a written request that contains questions to which you are uncomfortable responding, you do not need to provide a detailed response to all questions. You may also wish to consult with the local human resource representative for your college/unit.

Note: Salary information is only to be shared **externally** as part of an employment verification process handled by Records Administration, Office of Human Resources.

Note: In cases where an external source contacts a Cornell University employee (supervisor, co-worker, etc.) who is not comfortable giving a reference, the request should be discussed with the local human resource representative or forwarded to the Records Administration department, where an "Institutional Reference" will be provided.

Note: If you agree to provide a staff member with a general letter of reference for use in job search efforts, it is important that you apply similar guidelines, as outlined later in this document. Please keep in mind that as a reference, you will be best able to support a person's candidacy by actively

participating in a reference-checking process for a specific job, as opposed to writing a general letter of reference.

Institutional Reference

The Office of Human Resources, Records Administration, responds to requests from outside of Cornell for an institutional reference. Records Administration is authorized to verify dates of employment and current or most recent job title and department information as found in the university Human Resource/Payroll system. Except where release of material is required by law, Records Administration will not release any additional material from their University Personnel File unless written authorization from the employee has been received.

Responsibilities and Expectations

Responsibilities of Current Staff Seeking Other Employment

To ensure that the reference-checking process goes as smoothly as possible, staff members seeking other employment should attend to the following guidelines:

- Identify supervisors and co-workers who have knowledge of their work skills and experiences and who would potentially serve as references
- Ask those they have identified if they are willing to serve as references during their job search
- Check with the people who have agreed to serve as references in order to understand the nature of the information they will be able to share during a reference check
- Notify references of their application efforts, including the nature of the positions (title, role, required skills) and the name of the employer
- Provide updates on the status of the searches and inform references when they accept a new position

In addition, if a current supervisor is not listed as a reference, staff members are encouraged to inform their supervisors that they are seeking a transfer as early in the process as possible, ideally before formally interviewing.

Responsibilities of Cornell Faculty and Staff Who are Asked to Serve As a Reference and/or Contacted As a Reference

Refer to the guidelines section of this document prior to providing any reference.

A Cornell faculty and staff member should:

- Inform the staff member if you are willing to serve as a reference
- Discuss with the staff member the nature of the information that you will share during the reference check process
- Be clear about your assessment of their performance strengths as well as areas that need further development
- Be prompt in your response to reference requests
- Share factual information
- Be forthcoming with information, especially when contacted by another Cornell department

- Speak to the local human resource representative in your college/unit if you are uncomfortable responding to a reference check request. In these cases, it may be appropriate to refer the caller to the Records Administration department, where an “Institutional Reference” will be provided

Expectations of Faculty and Staff Who Are Contacted for an Internal Reference

It is the expectation that faculty and staff who are contacted for an internal reference will fully participate in the process and will provide relevant, job-related information. Current or former supervisors may be asked to provide various job-related documents, including performance dialogue forms, letters of recognition and disciplinary action, records of training and development, and any other performance-related information, particularly in the case of an applicant who is a finalist. Responding managers and supervisors may either opt to provide the requested documents or speak to the information contained in them during the phone conversation.

Co-workers and others who are contacted, but who were not, or are not, supervisors of the applicant, should provide relevant job-related information based upon their particular employment relationship with the applicant.

Caution: While applicants are strongly encouraged to ask those they wish to use as references in advance, in some cases, supervisors and/or co-workers may receive a call or written request with no prior notification.

Note: In cases where an internal source contacts a Cornell University employee (supervisor, co-worker, etc.) who is not comfortable giving a reference, the request should be discussed with the local human resource representative.

Guidelines

Guidelines for Giving Internal and External References

When giving a reference, it is important that the following guidelines be followed:

- Provide references only to persons with a legitimate reason to need a reference on a current or former employee. If possible, arrange a time for you to call the individual back to ensure the authenticity of the reference caller or the organization submitting a written request. This will also give you some time to prepare for your discussion about the person’s qualifications.
- Ask the person requesting the reference to describe the position responsibilities and skills required in the position. Keep your comments relevant to these skills.
- Provide only factual, honest, documented and job-related information.
- Share only information that you know through your own work-related experiences. Do not state as fact assumptions or perceptions that you have formed through conversations with colleagues or others.
- Do not provide any information that would come as a surprise to the current or former employee. Limit the discussion to items that have been discussed with the individual during the course of their employment.

- Document the name of the person you are speaking with, the organization they represent, telephone number, e-mail address and reason they have requested the reference as well as information that you provide during the conversation.
- Clearly state your relationship to the current or former employee. If you are not the direct supervisor, explain the perspective from which you are responding to their questions (co-worker, client, other). In addition, you may share the name of the current supervisor if you know it.
- Indicate how current/relevant the information you have is (i.e., when you worked with the employee).
- Remember there really is no such thing as an "off-the-record" or "confidential" conversation with someone seeking an employee reference. Don't say anything in such conversations you would not otherwise say were the conversation "on-the-record".

Note: For internal inquires, for an applicant who is a finalist, supervisors may be asked, by the prospective hiring supervisor or unit human resource representative, to provide various job-related documents such as the employee's performance dialogue forms, letters of recognition or disciplinary action, record of training and development, and any other performance-related information. Responding managers and supervisors may either opt to provide the requested documents or to speak to the information contained in them during the phone conversation.