

What LinkedIn Users Ought to Know about Job References

Job references still matter. Eight out of 10 HR executives consistently contact references for professional (89 percent), executive (85 percent), administrative (84 percent), and technical (81 percent) positions, according to a [SHRM survey](#). However, these formal reference-check conversations are getting less helpful in clarifying if someone is truly fit for the job. Specifically, a referral who works for a Fortune 500 company is no longer able to formally convey subjective yet rich data on a job candidate's employability. Instead, references employed by these big firms are now limited to sharing facts (such as dates) around a candidate's work history. Legal implications have caused this shift.

Meanwhile, smaller (or scrappier) organizations need opinions—i.e., richer data—from trusted sources. They need to know way more than a candidate's years of employment. They need to know about a person's employability and personality. Otherwise, a bad hire can result in a cultural misfit—and a poor cultural fit is harder to absorb in smaller firms as per an HR leader at Pinterest.

So what does this mean for smaller organizations that need richer data? These firms are deformalizing the reference-check process, looking beyond your list of references and creating their own contact list to call upon for sincere information about your candidacy. Many are turning to your social media channels as their job reference database, specifically LinkedIn.

While this challenge to uncover who will be called can be rather intimidating for someone with 500-plus connects, I have through my coaching engagements been able to figure out patterns that will take the guessing out of this process. **See below how to identify the three connections that are fair game to be called upon and what you should do to proactively prepare them for that phone call.**

Start by typing into the LinkedIn search field the company name of the firm that is interviewing you, then ask yourself:

1. Are you connected to ANY current company employee? Imagine that you graduated from a top-tier business school two years ago, secured a role in a top consulting firm, and you want to transition from consulting in a big organization to working for a startup. Completely hypothetical, right? You progress through a nine-person interview process, none of which involves a business case, yet was trying to get down to how you would help the firm grow. You rock the conversations. Then the firm asks you for a

couple of references. Both are called. However, to your surprise, so is your former colleague, Dr. Mac, a current silent investor of this startup. It turns out that you are connected to Dr. Mac via LinkedIn.

Lesson: yes, provide the prerequisite references, but thoroughly check to see who you are connected to in a target organization. Approach these contacts. Preparing them will help you regain control on who can speak on your behalf during the employment process. Alternatively, if you are connected to individuals who you don't think would speak favorably, then perhaps you should disconnect from them temporarily via LinkedIn—this is one way to protect your candidacy.

2. Who recommended you on LinkedIn? Anyone who has publicly recommended you on LinkedIn is now eligible to serve as one of your references for two reasons. First, they have already written on your behalf, and second, many say in their comments that they are open to providing more details around their recommendation. I was coaching a medical school student working on securing a residency in anesthesiology. While assembling recommendations for an inaugural leadership program, she garnered 46 LinkedIn recommendations. She submitted three to the program officially, yet four individuals were called to learn more about her intentions and dedication to leadership in the medical field. While I do not recommend that you secure 46 LinkedIn recommendations, I do suggest that you strategically think about whom to ask for a LinkedIn recommendation. Reengage them before you start to submit job applications anywhere. Share your recent résumé, a sample cover letter, and a prospective job description. Give them a heads-up that they could be contacted because of their LinkedIn recommendation.

3. Are you connected to any interviewer via LinkedIn? If you know who is interviewing you, see if you have any mutual connections. It does not matter if they are current employees of the firm for which you are interviewing. It's likely that this recruiter or manager will call the connection simply to get a sense of your character. As a result, it's wise to research anyone in the decision-making process or even an influencer on LinkedIn to see if those connections sprout up. Another way to truly leave no stone unturned is by checking Facebook to see if you have any mutual friends. Take Stanley. He was gunning for an engineering opportunity in a midsize firm in North Carolina. He thought he had the job in the bag. The founders of this company witnessed his work. They called him to better understand his capabilities. However, the founders did their homework on Stanley. They noticed two of his LinkedIn connections.

Both were their personal friends. So after their conversation with Stanley, they called both for candid references because they were trusted sources. One of them had no viewpoint on Stanley; the other had a mixed viewpoint on Stanley's level of sophistication in creating Java-based solutions. Despite the great interview with Stanley, both founders withdrew their interest in him following the lukewarm recommendation from a personal friend of theirs.

The beauty of LinkedIn is its transparency—this, however, is also its flaw for a job seeker. If you are not proactively using LinkedIn throughout the job-hunt process, then you are diminishing your chances of getting an attractive job. Meanwhile, when it comes to job references, LinkedIn is exposing your network. If you had to invest in an employee and knew that you could ask an old friend about their performance, wouldn't you? Or would you solely rely on calling a stranger's self-selected references? What if your reputation relied on that new employee's success?

Capitalize on LinkedIn Endorsements

Your career is no place for crowdsourcing. However, through LinkedIn Endorsements your connections are now able to weigh in on your skills. The more endorsements a skill receives the more credible that one skill is *because* your contacts agree. Yet, it takes zero effort which makes LinkedIn Endorsements a great engagement strategy, however there are doubts that they add value to the site's 175M+ users.

If lengthy recommendations are additive rather than evaluative, as [Forbes](#) suggests, then how seriously can we take someone endorsing a skill with the click of a button? Today, there is a frenzy around its use, from expressing appreciation for one another's skills to playing around with a new digital toy. You should not rely on endorsements to get you hired, but you should capitalize on its momentum. It'll only take a second.

Think ahead when trying to derive value out of LinkedIn endorsements. Recruiters will start seeking candidates with the most endorsements relevant to a skill set. **Start by curating the best menu of skills & expertise possible, aim to rank highest in that one skill you want to be known for, ask for endorsements and provide them as a way to revive old connections.** Here's how to prepare:

1- Curate your "skills & expertise"

You can add up to 50 skills to your LinkedIn profile, however you can't be an expert in all 50. Instead, direct people to the 10 skills you *want* to be known for because that is how many skills LinkedIn generally features on your profile. Your 40 other skills are deprioritized. Include skills, within the 10, that you want to use going forward. I imagine that once this functionality gathers a sizable amount of data, recruiters will utilize endorsements to quickly rank candidates to contact. For instance, when they are seeking a kick-butt project manager they will be filtering for the person with the most endorsements on their PM skills. This is why you curate.

2-Aim to rank highest in that one skill you want to be known for

Your skills & expertise are now ranked amongst one another. Based on the number of endorsements that each skill garners, your number one expertise has been crowdsourced. Again, your career is no place for crowdsourcing. **You need to own your profile by identifying the most critical skills in light of**

your next opportunity. Solicit endorsements on the top three skills that you want to be known for. (e.g. if you want to move into sourcing and procurement then highlight your negotiation skills)

3-Ask for endorsements

The same rules apply when it comes to seeking credible recommendations as I wrote in my Three Pillars to Successful Recommendations blog. E-mail the best connections you have, who are well-known in your desired industry, and request their endorsement on your preferred skills. Recommendations take time to write. They can't use that as an excuse when you request an endorsement.

4- Endorse others to revive your network - it'll only take a second

Here is your excuse to forego a note to reignite or strengthen relationships. Anyone with a network of more than 500+ connections has folks who they haven't spoken with in years. Endorse old professional connections and use LinkedIn Endorsements' novelty as your excuse to reconnect. When you compliment publicly, you will stroke their ego, which may be useful and this is always a great thing if you need to talk with them later about an opportunity.

How to Secretly Use LinkedIn

Wild flurries of LinkedIn activities have resulted in premature pink slips. If your boss or colleagues see signs that you are job hunting such as connecting with recruiters, updating your profile after you got that year-end bonus, or that you are following a slew of companies then your current situation can be compromised. Yet, your professional relationships are on LinkedIn and you can't disconnect from your bosses and colleagues because those are signs too.

So how can you use LinkedIn to facilitate a transition without raising red flags that you are job hunting? That was the #1 question asked during a LinkedIn Q&A call I hosted for the Alumni of the Ivy League Group last week. My answer is that yes you can...by hiding your activity, concealing who you are, and using my workaround to inform everyone except your boss (and potential snitches) that you want a new job.

How to hide your activity – Simply turn off your LinkedIn activity broadcasts. An activity broadcast is triggered when you connect with folks, update your profile, or follow companies. Go to your name on the upper right hand corner of your profile > Select settings > Choose “turn on/off your activity broadcasts” and turn that puppy off! Beware, if you update your photo, join a group, or add an application to your profile then these activities cannot be hidden – in these instances apply changes slowly (maybe weeks apart) so that they are not obvious. Another idea is to select who can see your activity feed on your profile page; to use this feature select “only you” within the same settings page mentioned above.

How to conceal who you are – Hiding your identity makes sense when you want to view profiles without drawing attention to yourself. Use this feature when you wish to see your boss and colleagues' profiles for inspiration to update your own - as I suggest to my clients and allude to in my blog about [résumés](#). In this case, go to your name on the upper right hand corner of your profile > Select “settings” > Choose “select what others see when you've viewed their profile” and go anonymous. However, if you want to generate interest from recruiters or prospective employers then don't be

anonymous– let them know that you were researching them. This is a great way to get potential employers to read about you because you looked at them.

Check out [Exhibit A](#) to find this Settings>Privacy Control page where you can hide your activity and conceal your identity.

How to tell everyone except your boss and potential rats that you want a new job – Export your LinkedIn contacts to excel, edit that CSV file (i.e. remove your boss/colleagues/anyone that will rat you out), and then email the list your resume, cover letter, and elevator pitch. Go to Contacts > Connections and then on the lower-right hand corner >Select Export Connections: Check out [Exhibit B](#). Use this functionality sparingly and strategically.

Three Pillars to Successful LinkedIn Recommendations

LinkedIn recommendations are useless...if not supported by a strategy. After tailoring LinkedIn profiles for professionals who have successfully attracted attention, I found that having a single objective when crafting your online presence and applying its essence within each section works best. LinkedIn recommendations are NO exception to this idea!

Susan Adams in her Forbes article, "[Everything You Need To Know About LinkedIn Recommendations](#)," discusses 11 truths beyond endorsements and concludes that having them **can** help your cause. Now, I want to improve the odds that they **will** help you; this takes being strategic about three factors: their writer, content, and readers.

Writer – Seek credible endorsers. Target someone who is selective when it comes to their public recommendations. If they have recommended 15+ people, immediately look elsewhere. **The more discerning an endorser is the more credible their exclusive endorsements will appear.** Alternatively, consider seniority along with availability. Ideally, ask the most reputable and senior professional within your desired field to endorse you. The caveat however is that they should be available to take a phone call on your behalf. As Ms. Adams learned, hiring managers prefer talking to references to elicit the most honest and useful information regarding your candidacy.

Content – I agree with Ms. Adams that specificity matters; however, **"ultra-specificity" as it relates to your sector and role is king and to know what is lacking or expected in your industry you must do homework.** For example, according to the [2012 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), the following three industries are least trusted to do what is right: financial services, banking, and media. Given this finding, if you are seeking an opportunity within these fields, ask for an endorsement regarding your character. If you exhibited integrity while working on a specific assignment then ensure they highlight that moment. Otherwise, consider what makes you stand out amongst your peers vying for a particular role. If you are seeking a systems engineer opportunity where heavy analytical skills and a passion for numbers are expected, ask an endorser to discuss your atypical written and verbal communication skills.

Reader – You can control (to an extent) who reads your recommendations given your connections and self-marketing efforts. The best case is being recommended by someone who knows the hiring manager.

If you are connected to both parties (the writer + the reader) then this reader will likely read that person's viewpoint. However, these "golden connections" are rare hence self-marketing efforts matter. **A fabulous idea used by a member of the [Alumni of the Ivy League Group](#) is to feature your best recommendation within your summary statement.** Once you do this, aggressively target your marketing efforts. Email folks connected somehow to your target firms; include a link to your LinkedIn profile within your email signature. Otherwise, update your LinkedIn status with valuable content or a career transition progress note. Alternatively, find the LinkedIn groups where decision-makers hang out then contribute.

Go ahead and start soliciting strategic recommendations!

LinkedIn Groups: Don't Have Regrets

Stop ignoring your LinkedIn groups! Yes, you can join up to 50 LinkedIn groups. However, don't stop there. Ignoring them can mean missing out on desirable opportunities that you may later regret. For instance, if you had paid closer attention just last week (the week of June 18th, 2012) to these few groups, here is the activity you **could have** capitalized on.

- **129** comments were made in the “Harvard Business Review – Readers Forum.” This group’s membership has more than 12K senior managers i.e. influencers. You **could have** joined key discussions, shared an informed viewpoint, and impressed a reader – all this **could have** led to an interview
- **97** jobs were called out in the “American Association of Advertising Agencies” group. You **could have** figured out who you knew within these hiring companies, reached out to them, and applied to a job all within one tool
- **7** promotions were announced within the “Cosmetics and Beauty Network” which means that there are jobs to be filled. You **could have** congratulated those who were promoted and asked them directly if they knew of other opportunities within their team...namely if they had already been replaced

Here are ways to prevent you from missing out on the opportunities that will surface within your LinkedIn groups next week. Make it a priority to try these ideas on your top three groups.

Listen – Incorporate reading group discussions within your workflow. Select at least one day a week and read open discussions. Drill deeper on discussed topics through other websites to increase your content expertise. Learn about the authors of these discussions. Notice trends. Use this knowledge to inform your professional job hunt strategies, the discussions in which to participate, and the conversations to follow.

Participate – Strategically provide your viewpoint by considering the audience as well as your objective. If you are a job seeker, then use a group discussion as your chance to demonstrate how you think to prospective employers. Alternatively, as an established professional, then use a group discussion as a way to share your expertise with your peers and open yourself to unadvertised opportunities i.e. the jobs made for you not the jobs made for the masses.

Follow – Once you hear about new companies or notice that there are a few top influencers then follow them. You can follow firms within LinkedIn or via Google alerts. On the other hand, introduce yourself to the discussion leaders within your top groups because they can serve you well during your job hunt or even when you need a viewpoint to inform a decision down the line.

Don't miss out on next week's opportunities!