

## [Hiring: References: Backchannels ... don't do them!](#)

### Premise:

- A candidate's performance during an interview process is not indicative of their future work performance.
- Reference interviews are far more effective in predicting future performance.
  - ie- How people behaved at work in the past is the best predictor of how they will perform at work in the future.
- But these references are only useful from people who worked directly with the candidate
  - ie- Managers and peers

### Why Backchanneling Fails:

- It's easy to get connected to someone who worked at the same company and had indirect contact with the candidate.
- But few in backchannels have ever worked directly with the candidate as a manager or peer.

### Superior Method: Top-Grading Style Reference Check

- Use a [structured approach inspired by the book \\*Who\\*](#).
- After the candidate has passed the initial screen (where you determined that you like them, and they weren't scared off by [Hiring: The anti-sell](#)), schedule a second interview called a Top-Grading interview.
- In this interview, review the candidate's job history from school onwards. For each job, ask for the name and spelling of their direct manager. This takes roughly 20–30 minutes.
- Make sure that you collect at least 7 names. If the person has not had 7 managers, ask for the names of all the peers at one or all of their jobs, so that you have a list of more than 7 people with direct work experience with the candidate.
- You can ask other things about each job experience, but the name and spelling of their direct manager (and peers) is by far the most important information to collect.

### References:

- If at the end of the full interview process, you want to move forward with the candidate, make them a verbal offer contingent on successful reference interviews.
  - "I really like you. I'd like to hire you. I am going to make you a verbal offer now that is contingent on successful reference interviews. If I made you the following offer, would you accept?"
  - Once you agree verbally on an offer, then ...
  - "Now I am going to conduct the reference interviews. Can you please connect me to the following managers that have worked for ... (list the managers that you choose, not those that they candidate choses).
- Talk to 3-7 former managers and/or peers.
- The candidate should do the work to get those former managers and peers to talk to you.

- If the candidate is unable to get those people to be willing to talk to you for 10 minutes, that is a red flag.
- Each of these people is someone who:
  - Has direct work experience with the candidate
  - The candidate did NOT cherry-pick
- If the reference interviews are as good as you hoped they would be, then make a final offer to the candidate (which they have already verbally accepted).

#### Advantages:

- Ensures direct contact with relevant references (managers).
- Reduces risk of cherry-picked references.
- Identifies red flags if candidates can't connect you with specific managers.

#### Outcome:

- This method secures insights from the most relevant sources, yielding accurate, unbiased reference checks. It's proven far more effective than indirect backchannel methods.

#### Exception:

- The one place where it can make sense to backchannels is when you have met a candidate that you like, but you want to do a sanity check before committing your entire team to a full round of interviews. If you are able to do a quick backchannel to make sure the candidate isn't toxic, then it can make sense to do so.
- I still question this use case, but it has marginal utility.
  - In my recruiting process, I move so fast that there isn't time for such a backchannel. When I first meeting a candidate, if I like them, I then show my love to them instantly and invite them for a full round of interviews that same Friday (my team keeps Fridays meeting-free, so they are always available for such interviews). At the end of that day of interviews, if I am still a go, I make a verbal offer to the candidate pending reference interviews. If they accept, I do reference interviews (with the former managers and direct peers of the candidate) the following week. This is usually completed in 2-3 days. From first meeting to final offer takes less than 2 weeks. I find that this speed is a huge selling point to the top candidates. And in that process, there is no time for backchannels which have little value anyway.