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Dear Lalli
By Wendy Lalli

Dear Lalli,

I'm a middle-level manager in an insurance company who is about to begin a search for a new job. I like the company I work for but my immediate supervisor is the boss from hell. I know that at some point potential employers are going to ask for my references and I'm not sure whom I should use. I definitely can NOT use my current boss! Suggestions please!

Sincerely,

Looking in Lockport

Dear Looking,

All too often job hunters act as though submitting references to a potential employer is a meaningless formality. It's anything but. A bad reference can kill a job offer. So can one that's just lukewarm. Even when an interviewer decides to overlook a less-than-glowing reference, they'll probably have reservations about the new hire that will be hard to overcome.

Actually, since employers, especially large corporations, are afraid of being sued, the likelihood of your current boss bad-mouthing you to an interviewer is pretty slim. Most large companies will only confirm an employee's dates of employment and their title. Period. Yet your instincts about your boss are still correct and you should absolutely NOT give him as a reference. Here's why.

Your references should help to confirm a potential employer's intention to offer you a position. If your references are impressive enough, they may even inspire an employer to increase a salary offer and/or the job's responsibilities and title. In effect, references are first-person endorsements of the claims made during an interview. As such, they can come from *colleagues* who worked

with you, *direct reports* who worked for you, *vendors* who sold business products and services to you or, perhaps best of all, *clients* who benefited directly from your work.

Direct reports can speak about your ability to lead and mentor others, how well you deal with personnel issues and your effectiveness in building a successful team. This can be hugely helpful to a new employer concerned about these issues. And getting this information from someone you actually supervised has a validity that nothing else does.

If you collaborated on a successful project with a colleague, ask him or her to be your reference. (Assuming, of course, that this person will be totally discreet about your job search.) A peer who works side by side with you is often more aware of your skills than a supervisor who checks in with you only once in a while.

Another reference possibility is a vendor who has sold you supplies or services. Vendors, unlike people within the company, can talk about your performance in terms that are industry-wide. After all, they deal with your peers at many other companies. So if they talk about how knowledgeable you are, how carefully you research a purchase before committing company funds, how creative you are in negotiating the best price – their favorable assessment carries considerable weight since it involves a direct comparison to the competition.

Finally, if you got along well with the boss before the last, ask them to serve as your reference.

When you submit your reference list to an interviewer, indicate your relationship with each person listed along with their phone number and e-mail address. Don't forget to contact your references to tell them who may be calling them, when and why. Give them as much information as you can about the job and the company and why you think this position would be a good fit for you. This isn't unethical. It's just common sense. A reference who has no idea why someone is calling about you simply isn't going to serve your interests as well as one who has been fully briefed.

Good luck!

Wendy

Dear Lalli,

I attended your panel discussion, “The Inside Scoop on How Recruiters Can Help You Find a Job” at the Oak Park Library. While the discussion was very informative, I wish we had more time at the end for additional questions. One question I was hoping to ask you in particular is if you have any contacts who work with auditors.

I am currently with a manufacturing company and have been there since I graduated from college in St. Louis in 2003. I began looking for new opportunities about the same time as your panel meeting. I have since taken some of the general advice offered by you and your guests, and now feel that I am ready for some professional help.

If you have any other seminars or meetings on career advancement I am very interested and would love to attend. I would also appreciate it if you can direct me to any recruiters you know that might be interested in my background.

Sincerely,

Reader from Riverdale

Dear Reader,

Thank you for attending the program and for your e-mail. I'm glad to see you got one of the main points all of the panelists made. Namely, it's vital to find a recruiter who understands and specializes in your industry or major skill set.

Regarding headhunters for auditors, I have one to suggest immediately. Michael Redisch at Humatal, 900 N. Michigan Ave in Chicago. Humatal specializes in placing people who are recent college grads until they've had about 7 years experience. So you're a good candidate for them. Plus, they are strong in the financial industry. Michael is a wonderful person and I know you'll enjoy meeting him. He has two partners who are as bright and as engaging as he is. To find

other headhunters ask the librarian for a reference book on recruiters. Depending on the book, recruiters are listed geographically and by industry. Find ones in the industry you want and start mailing out resumes. Follow up with a phone call to make sure they got the resume and to ask for a face-to-face interview.

With regard to future programs in Oak Park, they are already in the works. I'm also doing seminars for Wauconda Public Library and Oak Lawn Public Library this spring. You'll find times and dates are listed on my Web site, www.wendylalli.com.

Good luck and give my best to Michael.

Wendy

PS: Wishing you all the happiest of holidays and a joyous new year!