



Municipal Technical Advisory Service
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE

Published on *MTAS* (<https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu>)

January 17, 2020

Background Information and Reference Checks

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

The University of Tennessee
Municipal Technical Advisory Service
1610 University Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37921-6741
865-974-0411 phone
865-974-0423 fax
www.mtas.tennessee.edu

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Background Information and Reference Checks | 3 |
|---|---|

Background Information and Reference Checks

Reference Number: MTAS-1413

It is absolutely essential that a careful and thorough verification of the preferred candidate's personal and professional background be made before a final selection decision is made. Under current circumstances, this may be a very difficult task. Because of potential liability, verifying anything more than employment dates can be a challenge. Verification should also include academic credentials and credit reports if positions involve money or property. The applicant must sign a release form if you will be performing a background check. If you use a credit report, you must abide by the Fair Credit Reporting Act.

You may already have made some preliminary checks when you were considering which candidates you would invite to interview. Usually a candidate will either include a list of references on the resume or will indicate that references are available upon request. It is now time to do some serious checking. Reference checks should not be restricted to just those references provided by the candidate. Keep in mind that the candidate will provide the names of individuals who will give favorable references.

The purpose of background checks is to make sure that you touch third base on your way home. It should not be a negative, "let's see if we can dig up some dirt" approach. Rather, it should be viewed as one additional fact-finding procedure that will let you develop a complete and realistic assessment of the candidate. The way to do that is to communicate with the right people and induce their responses to the right questions. Before doing so, however, tell the candidate that this will be the next step. Make sure the candidate is ready and willing to undergo this scrutiny.

Who are the right references? Usually, they are current and prior supervisors, personnel directors and fellow workers. It is recommended that you use the references provided by the candidate to develop a network of further references. Speaking with references is similar to interviewing the candidate. You observe the same principles and procedures in questioning. Avoid the same common pitfalls, and heed the same legal constraints regarding age, race, religion, disabilities and marital status.

What are the right questions? Whatever is most important to you that is job related. Are there things you are unclear on or uncertain about? Satisfy yourself before making a decision. At the very least, cover the key items on the job description. Do not ask questions out of curiosity.

In making reference and background contacts, you may write a letter, pick up the phone or make a personal visit. You are likely to secure a more complete and in-depth response through verbal communication. Many people are bothered by the idea of expressing a negative opinion in writing. Be probing, and allow your contacts ample opportunity to be long winded. Look for similarities and differences in the comments you receive. Both are important. If one of your sources brings up something that you hadn't previously heard, and it is important, do not hesitate to contact someone with whom you have already spoken.

When you have finished checking and re-checking and have recorded the results, you should be in a good position to make a final selection decision. Send appropriate letters of rejection to all applicants for your position opening.

DISCLAIMER: The letters and publications written by the MTAS consultants were written based upon the law at the time and/or a specific sets of facts. The laws referenced in the letters and publications may have changed and/or the technical advice provided may not be applicable to your city or circumstances. Always consult with your city attorney or an MTAS consultant before taking any action based on information contained in this website.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/17/2020 - 2:04pm): <https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu/reference/background-information-and-reference-checks>



Municipal Technical Advisory Service
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE