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SECTION EC1

Career coaches advise tapping your personal network



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George Fleming (second from right), who assists clients with compiling lists of personal references, insists that "we all know many more people than we realize." Here, he coaches Jill Goodspeed (left), Adrienne Warren and Bill Klecka in their searches for new jobs.

Everybody into the reference pool

By Claire Bush
SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

Many job seekers overlook a way to network for a new career, according to some experts. Selecting and using personal references wisely can accelerate a job search and help workers land better jobs.

To create a network of references that works, follow these steps.

Know where to find good references. References can come from five pools of people, including former supervisors, subordinates, peers, customers and vendors, according to George Fleming, a business and career coach at Momentum Coaching Resources in Phoenix.

Job seekers should take up a pencil to list people they know in each category to create a "cheering section." The length of the list may be surprising.

"We all know many more people than we realize," Fleming said.

Get the right number. From this list, select three to five individuals as potential references. By keeping the number manageable, you are then able to build a rapport with each person and make him or her an active part of your job-search process.

Keep contact information up to date. Brooke Andrews, a professional resume writer at A New Beginning in Phoenix, counsels clients to keep their reference list fresh.

"The job title and company information should be up to date. Include contact information for the organization they work for, but don't give out home

phone numbers or addresses," Andrews said. "Be certain you respect the individual's privacy."

Be sure of a positive response. This may sound obvious, but a distinction between a ho-hum reference and a truly positive endorsement must be maintained. Employers will key in on a positive, enthusiastic response to their request for a reference.

"Call the individual first and explain your request," Fleming said. "If you receive a lukewarm or indifferent response, thank them for their time, then go on to the next name on your list."

"You won't want to use a reference that is anything less than highly enthusiastic about your skills and abilities."

Monica Mariani at Resume Polish in Phoenix agrees. "The most credible reference is a past supervisor or manager who can vouch for the reliability and skill level of the employee."

Follow through promptly. Once an individual has agreed to act as a reference, follow up by sending that person a note of thanks along with a current copy of your resume. Every time you use the person's name as a reference, make a phone call to let him or her know a potential employer may be in contact.

Be sure to thank each in advance for the time and assistance. Small courtesies like this work wonders in the business world.

Save references until the interview. "Employers today are overwhelmed with paperwork, and a list of references attached to an application is just one more thing to keep on file," Mariani said.

"When the hiring manager asks for references, it's a signal the firm is interested in pursuing you as an employee," Fleming said. "Wait until you are asked for your references; don't volunteer them."

Call each reference promptly after the interview. "Let them know who may be contacting them, and briefly outline the key elements you would like them to respond to," Fleming said. "That way, your references will be able to respond with relevant information."

Ask for feedback. "It's appropriate to ask references to call you back and let you know how the reference check went," Fleming said. "This will shed light on how you were perceived during the interview. You may also get a sense of what the key issues the employer is interested in about the job you're applying for."

Keep references apprised of your progress. "Keep your references up to speed on your job search and its results," Fleming said. "By communicating what's going on with you and your job search, you're using your references to the fullest capacity."

Send a thank-you gift. Once you've landed the job, send a brief note of thanks along with a small gift such as a plant or pair of movie tickets to each individual you've used as a reference. Appreciation reaps great results, both during the job search and afterwards. There's no such thing as a permanent career anymore, experts say.

"You never know when you'll need to use your reference list again," Fleming said.