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## P&T CONFIDENTIAL

# The Unrecommendation

**In every job search, you run the risk that your candidacy could be derailed by a reference call**

By [DAVID D. PERLMUTTER](#)

The job posting seemed like it was written with you in mind. You applied and soon got a call from a member of the hiring committee, and then from the full committee. You sparkled in both conversations and were invited to the campus for a visit. Again you seemed to hit all the right notes and returned home certain that you would get an offer. "We'll be calling your references now," a committee member said, as if that were just a formality.

Then silence. Weeks passed. Much later you received a form rejection letter, emphasizing the "unusually strong applicant pool."

The reasons that you might not win a job are legion: Your CV does not fit the position. Your application got lost in the mail. You remind the committee chairman of his ex-wife. But there is a common phenomenon that sinks candidacies, and it can happen at any stage of the hiring process. It's the unrecommendation — when someone you have listed as a reference, or whom the hiring committee calls outside of your reference list, says something about you that makes you much less attractive as a hire.

An unrecommendation cannot be avoided completely. Suppose you apply for a job and list three supportive references, but the hiring committee decides to call someone else in your department who is not a fan. You would hope that the committee balances the negative comments with positive ones from your recommenders.

In hiring, however, one bad herring can stink up the barrel. An assistant professor I know applied for a job at a good liberal-arts college that emphasizes teaching. He had great student and peer evaluations for his teaching, had won a teaching award, and even had sterling testimonials from former students. But a member of the hiring committee decided to call a

senior professor in the same department who was plainly jealous of the classroom success of the junior colleague. We don't know exactly what was said, but a sympathetic member of the search committee confided to the candidate that it was far from supportive.

Sometimes even listed references speak ill of the candidate. Presumably you have no idea if your good friend and trusted mentor thinks you are unqualified for the position. Or maybe the problem is that your friendly reference is so little acquainted with your achievements that the sketchy praise hurts your candidacy.

If one of your references feels too much good will toward you, that, too, can lead to an unrecommendation. An administrator at a community college told me that he had applied for several jobs at other colleges over the years and never seemed to get an interview, despite being well qualified. After he removed his college's vice president and president from his reference list, he began to get interviews and job offers. He suspects that his superiors liked him and his work so much that they did not want to lose him. Perhaps they unconsciously said things in the reference call that undermined his candidacy.

Another form of unrecommendation is misdirected praise. That happens when someone recommends you, but not for the job in question. For example, an assistant professor was unhappy at her college and applied for dozens of openings one year. She listed me as a reference on each one. I was happy to help, for she was a truly talented teacher and scholar. Other people apparently agreed: Four separate institutions called me for a reference in one week, and I got confused about what I was supposed to emphasize to which one. I did not actually sing her praises as a researcher to the tiny liberal-arts college, or extol her teaching to the think tank, but it was something like that. She did get a job, but without much help from me.

A negative recommendation, whatever the source or variety, will not only affect your job prospects but could also affect your promotion and tenure, since one way to advance in academe is to get a counteroffer, particularly one from a department or institution higher ranked than your own.

So what can you, as a job applicant or a tenure candidate, do about unrecommendations?

**Carefully select your references.** If you are sending out several applications, you may want to divvy up the references so that no one person is listed more than three times. That way nobody will be or feel overtaxed. Using more than one stable of references also avoids putting all your hopes on one person's whims and persuasive abilities. (If you are a doctoral student, however, you must always list your adviser.)

**Annotate your references.** You might list one professor and then note that he can speak to your teaching skills and how you interact with students. List another reference and explain

that she can talk about your research focus and productivity.

**Talk directly to your recommenders.** When you ask someone to be a reference, do it in person or by phone rather than via e-mail. That way you can detect hesitation or only perfunctory agreement when they respond.

**Help your references help you.** Don't just say, "I'm applying for some jobs and need a reference," and leave it at that. Give each reference a one-page summary of your applications. On that page, provide a one-sentence description of each of the jobs you are seeking and offer a list of talking points about how well you fit the positions. (Actually, that's a good self-test of whether you do fit the jobs, since if you can't persuade a reference, you won't be able to persuade a hiring committee, either.) For written references, the talking points are vital. If your recommender offers you the chance to read the letter of recommendation, take it. You care about your candidacy more than anyone else does, and you might find some points missing or worth adding. There is a fine line between getting a reference letter just right and being a pain in the neck, but, in general, most of us who write a lot of reference letters understand the stakes.

**Remind your references.** Remember, they may not be called for months. If you hear that a hiring committee will soon be calling, remind your references and resend the "cheat sheet." Trust me, they may have misplaced it.

**Indicate the relative importance of each job.** Rank the positions on your one-page summary in order from "most likely to accept if offered" to "just applying for the heck of it but would never go there." More than once I have spent considerable time on a reference letter only to find out from the requester: "Oh, that job — I really didn't want it. I was just curious."

**Anticipate the unrecommendation.** You may worry that a hiring committee will call an antagonistic colleague to ask about your collegiality. That is the fellow who has not spoken to you for two years, ever since you disagreed with him on a departmental issue. No matter who is right, or who is being petty, you don't want to get into a strained justification of your own conduct in a cover letter or an interview. If you really foresee a problem, it's better to have another colleague deal with it in a reference call.

And who knows? Maybe your worst enemy will be so eager to get rid of you that he or she will deliver a glowing reference on your behalf.

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