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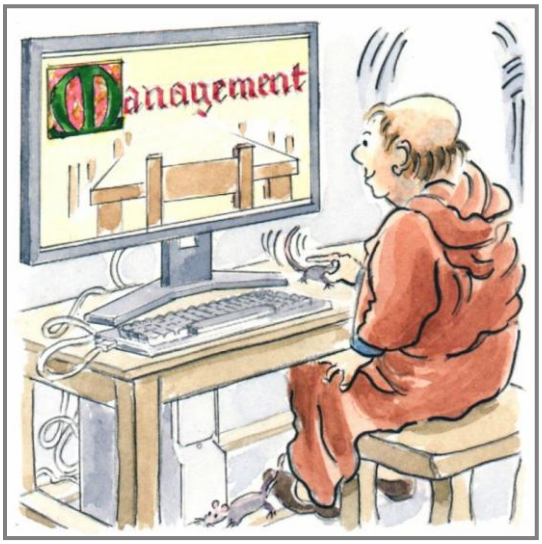

How to prepare a job reference

TN76 Training Notes series: Management

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So you've been asked to act as a referee for someone you know who is applying for a post in Christian ministry.

This might be a Minister being interviewed for a new church, but it could equally be a Youth Worker, an Administrator or a Pastoral Assistant. If the post is in a Christian mission agency you might be a referee for a potential CEO, a manager of some kind, a regional worker or a Finance Officer.

Perhaps you write references every week (if you are a Theological College Principal, for example). But for most of us it's an occasional responsibility which may have us with fingers poised over keyboard, hesitating over just what to say and what to leave out.

Here are some notes written by an occasional writer of references but a more frequent assessor of candidates for posts at short-listing and formal interview.

Some people feel that employment references have little value these days, especially if people are too frightened to say anything critical at all. But they can be valuable if you follow a few simple guidelines.

I sometimes wish that those who write the references I see had been given a spot of advice. Here is my attempt at this. I hope others will help me improve later editions of these notes.

I include a mention of issues relating to references from the present employer, but the focus for these notes is those you are asked to provide for a friend or member of your church.

1 Find out all you can about the post

Unless you are writing a general character reference, ensure you know as much about the post as you can discover.

- Study the job description and person profile. These may appear as separate documents or, for a Minister, they may be incorporated into a larger profile of the church.
- Check out the church or mission's website to get a feel and sense of whether the candidate might fit well here.
- Talk to the candidate about why they are applying for this particular post so you understand it from their angle.
- Check out how your reference will be used. Is it for short-listing purposes, for formal interview (and whether for use before or after the assessors make up their minds), or has the candidate been offered the post subject to satisfactory references? This may influence how you express yourself.

Never copy a previous submission for this candidate unless you are submitting a general character reference. The assessors can spot a submission that does not deal with the specifics of the post; it is also easy to leave in a wrong church or mission name by mistake.

2 Consider what your role should be

Who are you seeking to help? Are you writing a reference to repay a favour to a friend or are you acting as a consultant to the potential new employer?

You have actually been chosen by the church or mission to help them because you know the candidate and can give information that assessors, who only meet the candidate on one day, may not discover.

So put yourself in the shoes of the assessors for the post and think carefully what they want to know to help them. Your role is to be part of a team, with members with different roles to play, seeking to determine whether this post and this candidate come together in God's will or not. This is not a random exercise but one where you seek divine wisdom and guidance. You do not want them to get this post if they prove to be unsuitable for it.

If you feel you do not know enough about the candidate to fulfil the role you are being asked to play, contact your friend and ask if you are really the best person to act in this capacity. It may be that your personal knowledge of them is now dated, or that you do not often see them in ministry. A quiet word may also be needed if the candidate never had the courtesy to ask your permission to act as a referee in the first place!

It will be a little different of course if you are their present employer.

3 Submit your reference in the correct format

You may be asked to complete a form with questions printed on it or you may simply be asked to write.

If you are asked to send a written reference, make it reasonably formal and be sure to state the name of the candidate and the post they are applying for in the heading. Email is acceptable but a letter or letter attachment may carry more weight.

Start the letter or email by explaining briefly what your connection is with the candidate and what position you hold if that is relevant. Add for how long you have known them.

You may be asked specifically to cover particular issues: for example, a Minister may be asked to give an account of the candidate's involvement in their present church. Check to ensure you do not overlook such requests.

Be sure to avoid typos in a letter and lay it out neatly. Your credibility may be compromised otherwise.

Don't make it too long. One side of A4 in a general letter will be about right, certainly no more than two. Tabulate any lists and keep paragraphs short. You can always offer a phone call to add detail or to cover any points you are uneasy about putting into print.

If you are completing a set form, make sure you answer the specific questions. Avoid blanks. If a pro forma asks for your comment on their pastoral skills and you say nothing, the assessors will wonder if this was deliberate. If you don't know something, say so. The assessors will hardly expect you to answer every question in detail.

Finally, stick to any deadline you are given. References are usually needed without delay so an email attachment may be better than relying on the postal system. Always mark your email or letter 'Private and confidential'.

4 Assess the candidate against the requirements of the post

The person profile will probably be more relevant than the job description here. Think in terms of strengths and weaknesses for each of the main requirements.

Strengths

Try to be specific about their strengths for how they will fit the post. Don't give the impression they are good at everything, but spell out two or three specifics which match what the church or mission is looking for. Back up each claim about the person with some form of evidence.

If the post is a Youth Worker, talk about an excellent track record in working with young people that you have observed in terms of commitment, identification or gaining trust. If the person is applying as an Administrator, cover strengths such as reliability, accuracy, memory or creativity. For a Minister the person profile may lead you to enthuse about their teaching, collaborative leadership, vision or pastoral work.

It may be worth explaining in more detail how one project you have observed the candidate taking part in has worked out if this provides useful illustrations for their strengths. Some form of story-telling helps a reference come alive. Talk about transferable skills if the post applied for is very different from their present one.

In all posts requiring a Christian consider issues such as maturity of faith, a desire to learn, enthusiasm for ministry and track record of practical service in local churches.

Weaknesses

With every strength there will be obvious weaknesses and it would be helpful to know them. So never say there are none. The assessors will respect your reference, and it

should do your candidate no harm, if you underline the strengths but list the accompanying weaknesses.

- The gifted up-front speaker may be prone to bouts of depression.
- The brilliant leader may be hopeless in a team.
- The delightful pastor may avoid any conflict.
- The forthright evangelist may live a chaotic life.

You should mention any relevant issues to do with health, lack of Christian experience or lack of skills in any key requirements for the post. In such cases you may be able to be positive about the candidate's ability to overcome such things. However, be careful to be scrupulously honest and never to write with malice.

5 Avoid sweeping statements

Consider the following statements that I have seen several times in references.

"I cannot think of any weaknesses in this area." This indicates two distinct points in the strength-weakness axis and the candidate is wholly at the strength point. But life is not so simple. Some aspects will be weaker than others. This statement makes me think the referee does not know the candidate well enough to give an objective assessment.

"I recommend her without reservation. She's the perfect fit for this post." But, really? You know enough about both candidate and post to know that they are a perfect fit in God's will? By all means say something like, "I am sure she will be a strong candidate for this post." Your role is to be an objective assessor, not the leader of the fan club.

Then take this statement: "His preaching is superb". Contrast that with:

- "I find his preaching superb but many people find it difficult to understand him."
- "People tell me that his preaching is superb," (but who does 'people' refer to?).
- "I last heard him preach when we were at college 20 years ago and he was superb," (so are you the right person to be writing?)
- "His preaching is superb but it seems to have little impact on his congregation."

Think beyond the assessment of preaching to evidence for what that preaching has achieved. Has the church grown? Do people access the website sermon files?

Whenever commenting on 'soft skills' such as team-working, back your opinion up with factual information or observed results wherever possible.

6 Write nothing you would not want the candidate to see

Even where you mark the reference 'Private and confidential' be aware that it may go on a file which, under the terms of the Data Protection Act, the candidate can subsequently ask to see. You will need to be honest in any case but if in doubt about any point you can always offer to be phoned to discuss something rather than put it in writing. If you want to check all this out, the Information Commissioner's Office has a paper, 'Data protection: the employment practices code'. References are covered in section 2.9. Use the search box at https://ico.org.uk.

If you are writing an employer's reference you need to check out the implications of employment legislation. You have three duties:

1 to take reasonable skill and care to ensure the accuracy of the facts in the reference;

2 to ensure that the facts are not presented in such a way as to give the reader an unfair overall impression of the employee;

3 to ensure that the information in the reference is not misleading.

Google something like 'advice employer's references' and check out some of the free UK sites offering help. But some employers avoid litigation dangers by only stating facts about the present employment. This is usually of little value to the assessors but is a permissible response to a reference request.

You may of course be completely open with the candidate and send them a copy of your reference when you submit it.

Finally, don't forget to pray: for the candidate, for the assessors and for the writing of your reference. It's a great responsibility you are undertaking.

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN76. See also Article A17, *Staff selection step-by-step* plus Training Notes TN65, *Sharp interview questions,* and TN114, *How to prepare a church profile.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN76 under Management with a link to Structures.

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