

REFERENCES

At the beginning of your job search, prepare a list of references. **Whether or not a reference list is required as part of your initial application**, take it to interviews. Offer it to interviewers if you decide references are likely to strengthen your candidacy. Legal employers want **professional references** not character references. Legal employers want references who can vouch for your legal skills. Generally **legal employers ascribe more credibility to lawyers** than to nonlawyers.

What if you have little or no practical legal experience?

- Cultivate **one or two professors** to act as references. First-year legal research and writing professors are logical choices, because (1) they often know their students better than professors teaching large, survey courses, and (2) employers hiring law students place a premium on research and writing skills.
- Whether you use a professor or two, include supervisors. When you rely on particular work experience as qualifying you for a prospective position, and you don't provide a reference from that experience, you raise a red flag.

You generally need three references.

- Choose people with whom you have a **current or recent relationship**. Quality references are substantive, not superficial. Make it easy for your references to help you.
- **Never list people as references without asking them.** Tell your references what kinds of positions you're applying for. To refresh their recollection, give your references your resume and a synopsis of the work you did for them.

Who makes the best reference?

- People doing the same thing the employer is doing, if possible.
- Legal employers—and certainly judges, when you are applying for a judicial clerkship—**like to see judges included among your references**. At your earliest opportunity upon appearing in court—whether as a certified law student or as an attorney—cultivate a judge or two as references.
- Sometimes someone is a good reference simply because he or she is **influential with the employer**. When you have such contacts, use them.
- **Choose people who know your work first-hand and can meaningfully talk about you.** This may not always be your direct supervisor. A better choice could be an attorney who has been generous in praise of your work and who you are confident would extol your virtues.

What do employers look for in a reference?

- Is the reference in a position to assess the qualities the employer thinks are important?
- Does the reference make a strong pitch?
- Is the reference credible: experienced, objective, and well-spoken?

You can ask prospective employers not to contact your current or former employers until the last step before an offer. **Do not state, "References Available Upon Request" on your resume;** that's understood. **References do make a difference.** Experienced hiring attorneys are used to reading between the lines and can easily discern strong from unenthusiastic support.