



Merit Systems Protection Board

Contact: Arlin Winefordner
(202) 653-6772, ext. 1162
V/TDD 1-800-877-8339
(Federal Relay Service)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 29, 2005

MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD RECOMMENDS FEDERAL REFERENCE CHECKING IMPROVEMENTS

Most Federal hiring officials call a few of their applicant's references before making a job offer; but they may not be getting useful information from these phone calls, reports the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB or the Board) in a report, "Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call," released today.

The Board's study of hiring practices reveals that reference checking is widely practiced in both public and private sectors. It is used both to verify information obtained from job applicants and to assess skills and abilities relevant to the job to be filled. There is, however, marked variation in the degree to which employers structure and standardize reference checking. Additionally, training in effective reference checking is often not available to those who must conduct it. Structuring reference checks according to best practices and shifting responsibility from human resources personnel to hiring supervisors can raise the perceived and actual value of reference checking.

"By using reference checks effectively, selecting officials are able to hire applicants with a strong history of performance, rather than those who may have creatively exaggerated less impressive achievements," noted MSPB Chairman Neil A.G. McPhie.

MSPB's review also found that conducting reference checks has a number of both direct and long term advantages. Direct benefits include making better and more informed hiring decisions, improving job—person match, improving assessments that rely on self-reported information, demonstrating fairness and equal treatment of all job

applicants, and sending a message about the high expectations of the employer. Long term benefits include avoiding the costs of a bad hire, maintaining coworker morale by making quality hires, and gaining the public's trust that Federal managers take hiring seriously.

MSPB recommends that reference checks be conducted by hiring officials for each Federal hire, and that hiring officials be trained in a standardized process that is firmly grounded in job requirements. The Board further recommends that the former co-workers and supervisors of a job applicant support reference checking by providing honest and unbiased evaluations of the applicant's job-related abilities. Agencies should support reference checking by allowing supervisors to consult their employee performance records when responding to reference checks. These recommendations will increase the value of reference checking by Federal hiring officials.

The MSPB is an independent, quasi-judicial agency with responsibility for deciding Federal employee appeals from personnel actions taken against them, protecting the integrity of the civil service and other Federal merit systems, and conducting studies of the civil service and other merit systems in the Executive Branch. To request a printed copy of the report, e-mail STUDIES@mspb.gov; call (202) 653-6772, extension 1350, or write: Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation, 1615 M Street NW, Washington, DC 20419. The report may be downloaded from the Board's website at www.mspb.gov.