

Reference Checking: An Underused “Tool in the Toolbox”

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U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board
Office of Policy and Evaluation

Overview

- Background
- Reasons for using reference checks
 - Potential validity
 - Due diligence
 - Some barriers to use are illusory
- Guidelines for effective use
 - Policy
 - Practice – employer and applicant



Background – About MSPB

- A Federal Government agency
- Guardian of Federal merit systems
- Three main functions:
 - Employee appeals
 - Policy research and evaluation
 - Regulatory review



Background – MSPB Research

- Employment policy and practice is central to our role
- Research on selection issues includes:
 - Federal agency examining practices
 - Use of automated hiring systems
 - Federal employment policy
- Recent study of reference checking (publication pending)



Background - Definition

A reference check is a conversation—usually telephonic—between an employer and someone who knows the job applicant



Background - Definition

A reference check **IS**:

- An employment practice
- Grounded in job analysis
- Conducted with care
- A supplement to other valid assessments
- An important part of the hiring process

A reference check **IS NOT**:

- A background investigation
- Record checks
- Reading a letter of recommendation
- A “fishing expedition”
- Idle gossip
- A substitute for valid and rigorous assessment
- “Nice to do”

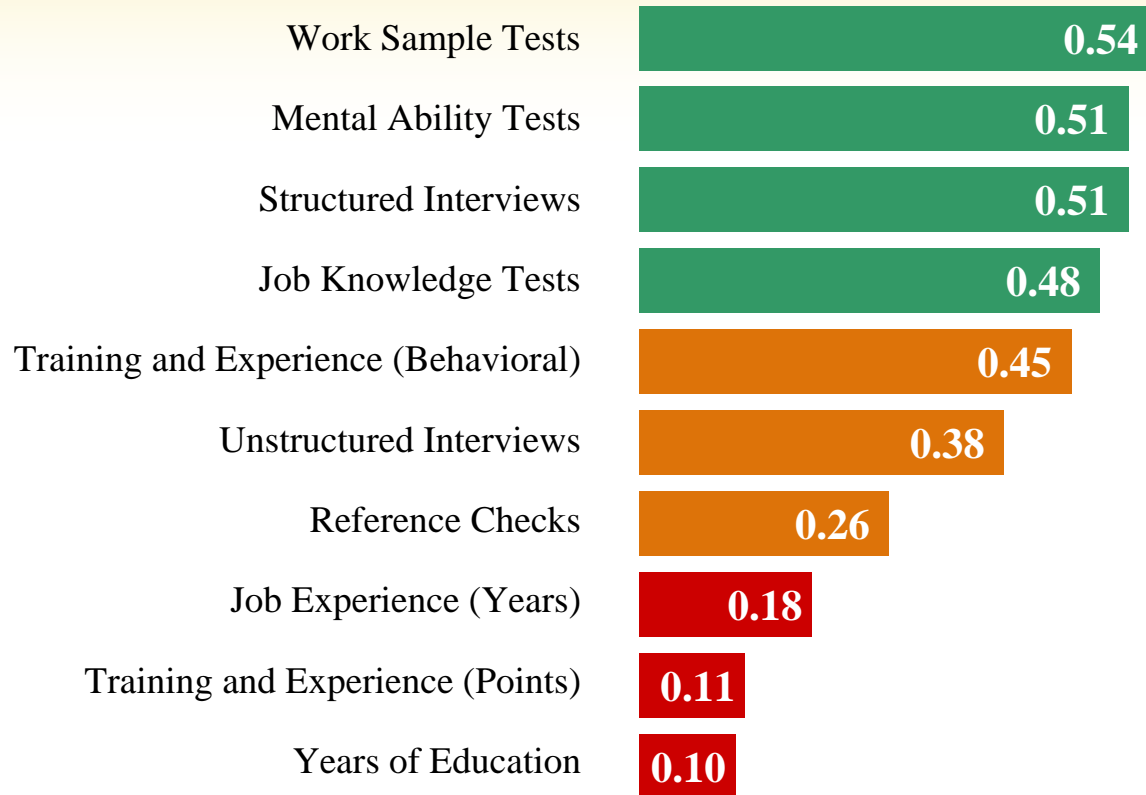


Background - State of the Art

- Limited attention from the I/O community
- Widespread use
- More attention from -
 - Employers
 - Hiring managers
 - “Consulting community”



The Validity of Selected Assessment Methods



1.0



Source: Schmidt, Frank L. and John E. Hunter, “The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 125, No. 2, 1998.

The Case for Reference Checks

- They can be valid enough to be useful
- They have *utility* beyond their validity:
 - “Quality check” on T&E
 - May identify the “competent but corrupt”
 - Due diligence
 - Development



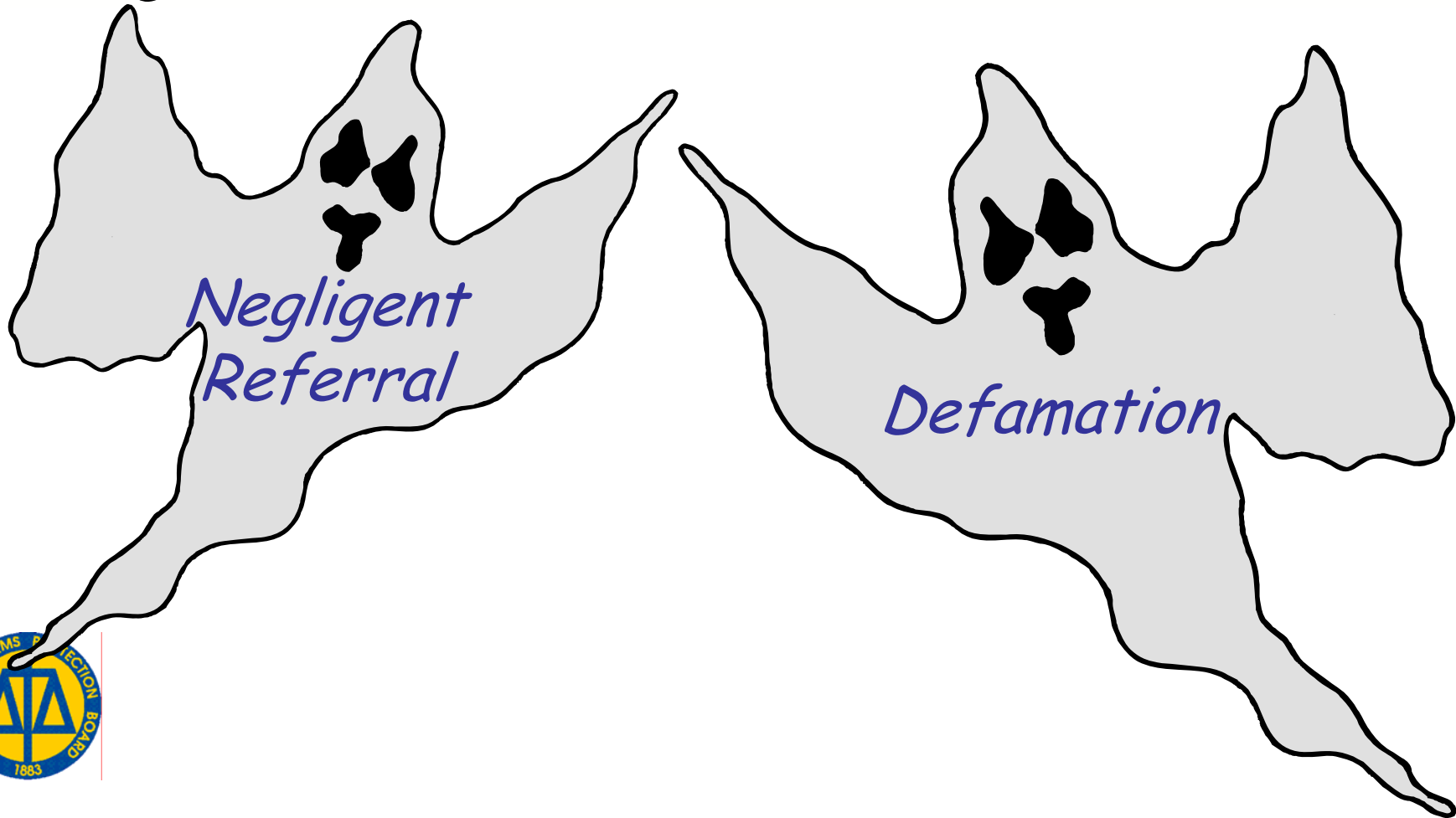
Validity of Reference Checks

- The validity of a reference check is a variable, not a constant
- Employers can influence the factors that determine validity



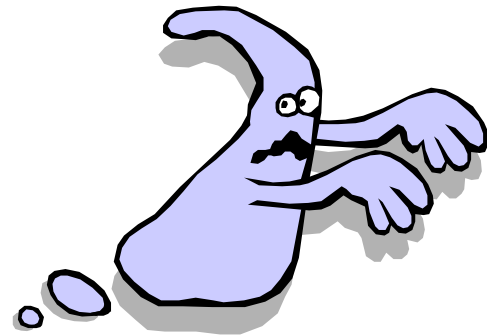
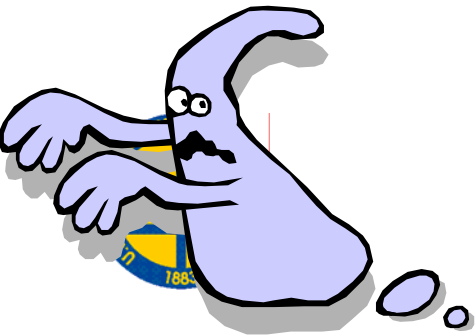
Legal Issues

- Legal risk cannot be eliminated



Legal Issues

- Legal risk can and must be managed
- The risks of conducting and providing reference checks are often overstated...
- ...and there are also risks in inaction and “diplomatic silence”



Guidelines for Practice

- Making information available
- Obtaining information



Making Information Available

- Seek applicant cooperation
 - Early notification
 - Names
 - Authorization / release
- Conduct and use reference checks responsibly



Making Information Available

- Adopt a “golden rule” policy
 - Openness
 - Honesty
 - Fair play
- Provide guidance to reference checkers and reference providers



Obtaining Information

- Provide notification and context
- Train reference checkers
- Use authorization
- Be flexible
- Be conversational but focused
- Document



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