

# Referees - Imposter or the Real Thing?



I don't think that anyone would disagree with me that reference checks are an important part of the recruitment process. I've conducted 100s of them over the years and I have also acted as referee to countless people.

However, hands up those who regularly verify the credentials of the referee? If you've acted as a referee yourself, has anyone ever verified your credentials?

I'd bet my bottom dollar that there are very few raised hands out there. I know that no one has ever checked me out as a referee.

Since mobile phone numbers have become the contact norm, it appears that our due diligence may have become a little one sided. I learned my lesson decades ago – let me share with you one unforgettable Christmas Eve.

I was left with a colleague's file to "tie up the loose ends" and to call her client before I left the office myself. Turned out my generosity of spirit was to be tested.

My colleague's client was extremely eager to get an offer to a candidate that night - 24 December. The candidate had 5 other written offers from pre-eminent law firms and this client did not want to miss out. Two referees were still to be contacted – one in Singapore and one in London. They were both nominated as ex Partners of major international law firms.

The candidate had provided mobile telephone contacts for both referees. I connected with the London referee on first attempt and proceeded to complete the reference check. However, despite the glowing recommendation, I was left with an uneasy feeling at the end of the call – my recruiter's instincts kicked in.

There was no logic to my feeling - after all, the candidate had a blue chip employment history, outstanding academic results (certified transcripts had been provided) and 5 leading law firms had made written offers. I had not personally met my colleague's candidate, but as they say if "something seems too good to be true it probably is" and "trust your instincts".

I called the London firm where this referee had supposedly worked. After persuading the HR Manager to reboot the system (she was on her way to Christmas drinks), she advised that they had never had a Partner by that name working with the firm. I asked her to double check. Same result.

Next port of call was academic records at one of Australia's major universities. You guessed it – no record of achieving the so called "certified academic qualifications" in law. Final call was to Admissions at an interstate Law Institute– yes this person was confirmed as admitted to practising law in that state and had been working with a well-known firm.

Interesting..... a practising lawyer without qualifications? So how did this person get registration without legal qualifications?

I decided to call the second referee in Singapore. Again, glowing reference. Again, I back checked with the referee's so called employer – no record of his employment at the firm. There were already enough inconsistencies for me to “pull the plug”.

For completeness, I called the Institute of Law in yet another state where this person had also practised. Another unlucky person manning the phone on Christmas Eve. In fact, she was elated that I had called. The Institute had been trying to track this individual down for some time as they had uncovered many discrepancies in this person's background.

The very last call that evening was to the client to withdraw the candidate's application. Obviously, they were extremely disappointed yet they were equally grateful that their clients had been spared receiving advice from an unqualified practitioner – a bittersweet Christmas present.

The individual in question accepted one of the other employment offers. Three months later the Institute of Law contacted me and finally took legal action and this candidate has not practised in Australia since.

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A decorative graphic of several interlocking puzzle pieces in a light grey color, arranged in a scattered pattern.

TALENT THAT FITS