

two major problems with this approach. First, these letters may do little to help the organization discern the more qualified applicants from the less qualified applicants. The reason for this is that only very poor applicants are unable to arrange for positive letters about their accomplishments. Second, most letters are not structured or standardized, meaning the data the organization receives from the letter writers are not consistent across organizations. For example, a letter about one applicant may concern the applicant's educational qualifications, whereas a letter about another applicant may focus on work experience. Comparing the qualifications of applicants A and B under these circumstances is like comparing apples and oranges.

The problem with letters of recommendation is demonstrated dramatically in one study that showed there was a stronger correlation between two letters written by one person for two applicants than between two people writing letters for the same person.³⁶ This finding indicates that letters of recommendation have more to do with the letter writer than with the person being written about. In fact, one study revealed that letter writers who had a dispositional tendency to be positive wrote consistently more favorable letters than letter writers with a tendency to be critical or negative.³⁷

In addition, a surprising number of letters of recommendation are written by the applicants themselves. Regarding graduate school admissions, the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants discovered that a whopping 38% of applicants were asked by their recommenders to write their own letters, which the recommenders would then later sign. And some applicants have confessed to bypassing their recommender altogether, especially if the recommender was not fluent in English.³⁸

Such problems indicate that organizations should downplay the weight given to letters unless a great deal of credibility and accountability can be attached to the letter writer's comments. In addition, a structured form should be provided so that each writer provides the same information about each applicant.

Another way to improve on letters of recommendation is to use a standardized scoring key, as shown in Exhibit 8.6. With this method, categories of KSAOs are established and become the scoring key (shown at the bottom of the exhibit). The adjectives in the letter are underlined and classified into the appropriate category. The number of adjectives used in each category constitutes the applicant's score.

Reference Checks

With reference checking, a spot check is made on the applicant's background. Usually the person contacted is the immediate supervisor of the applicant or is in the HR department of current or previous organizations with which the applicant has had contact. Surveys reveal that 96% of organizations conduct reference checks. A roughly equal number conduct the checks in-house (by HR) versus a third-party vendor. The most common information sought is on criminal background and verification of employment eligibility, former employers, dates of previous employment,