Providing Positive and Negative Recommendations

Prospective employers often ask for letters of recommendation that support an applicant’s qualifications. Such letters from former employers provide insights the prospective employer might not already have from the résumé and application message. People who request that you write a recommendation are reasonably confident you will report positive information. Occasionally, however, you may have to include negative comments in a letter of recommendation.

Writing Negative Recommendations

For a person whom you could not favorably recommend, you have the following options:

1. **Saying “No” when asked for permission to use your name.** Refusing permission may be difficult; but, for you, it is easier than writing a negative recommendation. For the applicant, your refusing to serve as a reference may be preferable to your accepting and subsequently sending a negative message.

2. **Letting the request go unanswered.** Failure to answer a request for information is in effect a negative response, even though the employer does not know whether you received the request. Nonresponse is legal and requires no effort; but it does not reflect your responsibility to the applicant, the employer, and yourself.

3. **Responding with an objective appraisal.** Responding with an objective appraisal will give you the satisfaction of having exercised a responsibility to both the applicant and the employer. Because of your information, an employer may escape some difficulty encountered after hiring an unqualified person. Your message could spare an applicant the agony of going to work on a job that leads to failure. Refer to the following example of a well-written negative recommendation.

4. **Responding in writing and inviting a telephone call.** Responding in writing and inviting a telephone call enable a reference to avoid putting negative ideas in writing. The message is short, positive, and easy to write as shown in the following example:

   Travis Kelley worked as a systems analyst for JEMCO from August 15, 2001, to December 30, 2004. The confidential information you requested will be provided by telephone: (601) 555-5432.

   Recognizing the possibility of negatives, which the reference did not want to state in written form, the recipient might not call. In response to such a call, abide by the same precautions that apply to writing recommendations.

   Because of the threat of possible litigation on the grounds of defamation, discrimination, or privacy violations, recommendations must be written carefully. Suggested guidelines for writing a legally defensible recommendation are as follows:

   • **Respond only to requests for specific information and indicate that your message is written in response to a request.** Verify only information that is provided by the employer making the request. Do not provide information that was not requested.
Label your message as confidential. Such precautions indicate that your intent was not to
defame but to give an honest answer to a legitimate request for information. In addition,
studies show that employers prefer confidential letters rather than open ones that allow the
applicant access to the information. Employers perceive the message to be a more honest
evaluation of the applicant’s employability.2

Provide only job-related information. If you are not familiar with the requirements of the
job applied for, ask the requester to send you a job description. Use this document to
include information that is directly relevant to the future job and to eliminate irrelevant
information that could be defamatory.

Avoid vague, general statements of the applicant’s personal ability. Instead, provide
specific examples of performance and the situation in which the performance occurred.

Provide specific facts for any negative information. For example, the number of workdays
missed without prior communication with the supervisor is a verifiable fact. To label it as “a
terrible record” or “irresponsible” is to pass judgment (which is best left to the reader).
Avoid such defaming and judgmental words as corrupt, crook, dishonest, hypocrite, and
incompetent.

Refer to the Case Analysis on page 00 in the text for other legal implications of negative recom-
mendations. Besides attending to legal issues in your response, realize that your writing techniques
are also important factors in the overall message that you convey. Suggestions include the following:

Include some positives, even if your overall recommendation is negative. A balanced
approach of positives and negatives will make the message appear more credible to the
reader.

Use an inductive sequence and stylistic techniques of de-emphasis (unless your feelings
are strong and you think emphasis of the negative is justified). Typically, the inductive
sequence with de-emphasis techniques will seem considerate.
Example of a Negative Recommendation

VANCE RILEY’S EMPLOYMENT RECORD

Osborn Grocery provides the confidential employment information about Vance Riley you requested in your June 1 letter.

Vance Riley worked from October 1 to December 13, 2006, as a courtesy clerk in our Greenwood store. He exhibited above-average skills at packing groceries, and he seemed to have good rapport with customers.

On three occasions (each on a Monday morning), he did not report to work as scheduled and had not given the shift supervisor any notice of his absence. He left the store at Osborn Grocery’s request.

While he was on the job, his work was satisfactory.

Writing Positive Recommendations

Fortunately, most people who invite you to write a recommendation are confident you will report positive information. Although the effect of your message may be to confirm some of the information already submitted by the applicant, do not devote all your space to repeating it. Instead, concentrate on presenting information the employer probably does not have. Your statements about proficiency and capacity to interact with others will be of special interest. Avoid unsupported superlatives and overly strong adjectives that may cause the employer to question your credibility. Regardless of whether a recommendation is for a promotion within the firm or for work in another firm, the same principles apply. The following example illustrates a recommendation for an employee who is seeking a promotion within a company.

Sources:


Anne Payne would be an ideal senior loan officer. For the following reasons, I recommend her promotion:

- She is efficient. Beginning with a $14 million loan portfolio, she now manages $25 million. In three years, the number of clients has grown from 16 to 26. Clients are astonished at the speed with which she completes paperwork.
- She stays informed. She spends time daily on the financial monitor and financial journals. Because of her knowledge, she has frequently made loans that would otherwise have gone to competitors.
- She works well with the staff. Colleagues communicate easily with her. Her friendly, positive disposition contributes to our pleasant office atmosphere.
- She helps maintain Southland’s public image. Active in Kiwanis and in fund-raising for the needy, she has frequent contacts with clients, prospective clients, and competitors in social situations. To me, she is an ideal person for reflecting the bank’s image.

A promotion would reward Anne for the part she has played in expanding our loans and would help us to keep her on our team.